



The Nowhere Sisters



JAN CASEY

THE NOWHERE SISTERS

A sweeping, emotional, historical saga of love, loss, family and forgiveness

JAN CASEY



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For Gerald Ward
RIP

Chapter 1

Wednesday 14 December 1938

Margarete

It was hard to walk in a crocodile line through the crowded streets. Margarete held on so tightly to Ingrid in front of her and Harald behind that her hands went numb. She wanted to pull away and give her fingers a good shake, but she didn't dare. If she lost the others now, she wouldn't know what to do or where to go. Her stomach clenched at the thought and goosebumps blossomed along her shins. Alone, she would have to rummage through scraps for a crust or a fish bone and try to find an old blanket to cover herself with at night. She glanced up to the head of the line, where Fraulein Thiess — marching briskly — was leading them towards the station, and wondered if she might be better off fending for herself in the back alleys of Berlin rather than being put on a train to a country miles across the sea.

How many times had she thought about running away during the years since Granny died? If she had escaped, there wouldn't be any of the other children to take her heel of bread, or slam a muddy ball into her, or wipe the dirt from their noses onto her back when they thought no one was looking. But a few weeks ago, when the glass had broken on top of them with deafening shrieks, she'd been glad to have the others to huddle with.

It had been coming for quite a while. They'd all seen the signs outside the shops that read: *No Jews Allowed* or *Only Jews Allowed Here*. It seemed to Margarete that the posters could just as easily have been worded the other way around, stating where non-Jews could and couldn't get their shopping. But non-Jews weren't forbidden from going anywhere they wanted to, and Jewish people were. They'd heard snippets, too, when the grown-ups thought none of them were listening. Fragments of information and gossip that added up to a very frightening picture.

'It's lucky they're taught here in the orphanage,' Fraulein Thiess had said. 'Those other poor children won't learn a thing now they've been banned from going to school.'

The cook huffed. 'That's the first time I've ever heard orphans referred to as "lucky".'

‘No papers again today?’ Otto, the caretaker, had asked.

The delivery man shook his head. ‘I told you yesterday. No more Jewish newspapers will be published.’

One of the cleaners sniffed all day because her little nephew was missing. ‘Him, and I don’t know how many others . . .’ Fraulein Thiess muttered to herself.

Margarete overheard Herr Klein from across the road whisper to the cook, ‘That’s it. We’re done for now.’ His tongue lolled from his mouth as he pointed two fingers to his head. ‘They’re saying a Jewish lad has gone and killed a German diplomat in Paris. And to make matters worse, the dead man was a member of the Nazi Party.’

Then came that terrible night. At first, the children heard that policemen were standing by and watching as windows in Jewish homes and shops were smashed, their possessions burned or ransacked or ruthlessly destroyed. Books were thrown into the streets and used to ignite bonfires with flames that licked the night sky. It was a mad, terrifying free-for-all. A woman — one of their helpers — pounded on the front door and Gisela, who was peeking over the banister, reported that the sleeve of her coat was hanging by a thread, her stockings torn. ‘They’re breaking all the windows in our shops,’ she said between gasps for air. ‘Synagogues are being razed to the ground, never mind if people are in them or not. Get the children somewhere safe.’

Something obstinate often rose up in Margarete when Fraulein Thiess barked out her orders, but that night they were a comfort — even when the teacher’s hands and voice shook as she screamed for them to crouch under tables and beds. The noise of the windows shattering above them made her whimper and long for the Fraulein to demand that it stop. Ulrika wet her knickers and little Jürgen sobbed over and over again for his ‘Mutti’.

‘Shut up, baby,’ a bigger boy named Dieter shouted, thumping the little fellow hard on his back. ‘Your mother’s never coming back. None of our mothers are. Get used to it.’

That had quietened Jürgen, but Margarete pulled him to her and felt his small ribcage heave with panic and confusion.

The next morning, the grown-ups were calling it Kristallnacht — the Night of Crystal — which seemed far too gentle and refined a phrase to describe the feral behaviour of that night. At least now the glass had been

swept away, although every inch of ground she walked on twinkled back at her with leftover crumbs. There had been so much of it that she thought shards and splinters of the stuff would be found in pavement cracks and gardens and embedded in bicycle tyres until she was very old — if she lived that long.

The crowds thickened as the Friedrichstrasse station loomed in front of them, and a few people stopped and stared as the chain of children weaved their way towards the entrance. Margarete glanced up in time to catch a sneer here and a smirk there. A well-dressed woman, shouting ‘Jews out!’ with venom, held up her toddler to look down on them.

At twelve, Margarete was old enough to know that she had as much right to be in this city and this country as they did, but if they didn’t want her then perhaps it was just as well she was being sent elsewhere. That made her chin tilt with defiance for the couple of moments it took Fraulein Thiess to lead them into the cold, draughty station. She could sense tension and agitation as the grown-ups gathered up the little ones, pressing them to their chests, holding their hands tightly, or keeping a strong arm around their shoulders. Some of the children snuffled or sobbed and held on with all the strength they had to their mummies and daddies, their grannies and their teddies. The scene made Margarete feel off balance, as if something that had always been true — that adults kept their children close for protection — had shifted. It felt wrong and unsettling, as if too many youngsters would now have to rely on people who really had nothing to do with them — just as she had to. A woman in an unbuttoned overcoat, with a small boy over her shoulder, pushed past and Margarete smelled the stench of dread that seeped from her armpits. Otto had stunk like that after he’d swept up the glass from the path. It had never occurred to Margarete before then that men cried, but Otto had, along with Herr Klein, who’d helped him. Now she was aware of that phenomenon all around her, though most tried to suppress their tears by contorting their faces into strange, quivering masks.

One by one they passed in front of a makeshift desk, had a tag put around their necks and were handed into the carriage of a train. She longed for someone to hold her close and console her with promises that everything would be okay, but there was no one like that for any of them. Margarete’s pulse pounded in her ears — there was still time if she wanted

to try her luck on her own. She dropped Harald and Ingrid's hands and decided that if she squirmed through that person's legs, ran between the pillar and that man, and then skirted around that sniffling grandpa, she could make it to the door and be gone within seconds. But then everyone darted one way and another: Ingrid was guided into the train and a scratchy piece of string with a tag attached was hung around Margarete's neck. She loosened a strand of hair from her plait, twisted it around her finger, then followed a man who beckoned her into the carriage and pointed to a seat next to the window. For a second, she hesitated. Ingrid was on the other side of the carriage and she didn't know any of the children sitting near her, their hands folded in their laps as Fraulein Thiess had taught them. With a frenzied gesture, the man pointed to the empty seat again, and Margarete took up her position.

Tears threatened and she felt as if she might be sick. Sweat was glistening on her palms, but her fingers were freezing so she rubbed her hands together furiously. A hollowness carved its way into her whole being and, for a dizzying moment, she had to steady herself on the hard seat. She felt truly on her own now, with no real idea of what was coming in the next few minutes or hours, days or months. But she steeled herself as she'd had to do so many times in her life — when Granny died and there was nowhere else for her but the orphanage; when other children jeered at her in the streets; when books were burned and glass was smashed. There was nothing she could do except, as Dieter had said, try to get used to it.

Chapter 2

Wednesday 14 December 1938

Margarete

The train shuddered. The movement jolted along Margarete's spine and made her sit up even more ramrod straight than Fraulein Thiess had instructed.

A whistle blew, followed by a cloud of steam floating past the windows. In the compartment, children wailed and sobbed. Doors slammed and the sound of choking tears reached them from outside. Margarete picked out Fraulein Thiess in the midst of the throng and, wanting to remain respectful, tentatively raised her hand. With that, her teacher pushed through the horde and placed her palm against the window. When Margarete put her hand over her teacher's — the cold, unyielding glass between them — she knew she would never forget this woman who had done her very best to love and care for all of them in the orphanage.

Then the carriage door was shaken so violently it sounded as if it would be torn from its hinges. A giant of a man, wearing a shabby jacket and a brown hat pulled low over his forehead, burst in with a tiny girl in his arms. She looked like a doll or an angel whose face had been ravaged by the watermarks of weeping — except dolls and angels didn't cry, did they? Her whole body was racked by sobs. A steady stream of snot ran from her nose to her lip and she swiped at it angrily with a sock she held tightly in her fist. With her other hand, she was desperately trying to yank the identification tag from her neck.

The man looked around wildly as the conductor warned him that he had to leave the train, but the small girl clung to him. Over and over, he shouted, 'Does anyone know this child?'

'We will find an older girl to be her helper for the journey,' one of the chaperones said, trying to take control of the situation. 'The little ones all have an older companion. Girls, who would like to take charge of this child?'

Those who already had a little one to care for turned away and a look of dread crossed the faces of those who didn't. It seemed as though none of them could face the role of minder to a furious little harpy — no matter how

beautiful she looked. But Margarete was overwhelmed with pity for the poor little mite and she imagined that, if the child allowed herself to be comforted by her, she in turn would find warmth and reassurance in keeping her close.

Unable to stop herself, she jumped up and said in a loud, confident voice, 'Me, Fraulein. I will look after her.' She thought the child would have to be coaxed to come to her, so she was amazed when she put out her arms and the little girl mirrored her gesture. She felt pleased with herself, as though she'd achieved something no one else could.

As if she were carrying a Dresden figurine of a cherub, Margarete walked back to her seat and gently draped her arm around her new charge's back. It was easy to tell that the child was completely drained, because her sobs quickly died down to a few shudders and she rested her head against Margarete's shoulder. Her face was sticky with sweat and, without saying a word, Margarete stroked the fair, silky hair away from her forehead. After a few more shivering convulsions, the child found her thumb and closed her eyes. The once-white sock hung limply from her slack hand and Margarete saw that two eyes, a nose and a smiling mouth had been ineptly embroidered on the toe — it looked as if the little doll had made her own dolly. Margarete wanted to weep when she imagined the child lovingly embellishing the keepsake to carry with her.

Margarete remained as still as possible and did nothing except gaze down at the little girl asleep in the crook of her arm. Her dark eyelashes fluttered and every time the thumb was about to drop from her mouth she drew it back greedily. After a time, Margarete was able to match her breathing to the rise and fall of the child's chest, and when she looked out of the window at last she was surprised to see the countryside rushing past.

Exhausted, her eyes flickered as she tried to focus on one tree in the middle of a field; a thin sliver of a lake; a man leading a herd of cows. Fraulein Thiess had once told her, when she'd asked about her family, that her mother and grandmother had come from the country, and she wondered if they'd lived in that solitary house she caught a glimpse of in the distance. But try as she might, she had never been able to recall it, which made her think the story had been a fib to make her feel better about her life. What she did remember was a couple of rooms in a big house in the middle of the city. She thought her mother had been pretty. Not in the same way as

Fraulein Thiess, who wore red on her lips and powder on her cheeks, but in a clean, fresh way with shining eyes and dark, plaited hair crossed over the top of her head. Sometimes she would sing lullabies to Margarete as she caressed her round belly that was full of a baby sister or brother for her. *Guten Abend, Good Evening. Gute Nacht, Goodnight.*

A shudder went down her spine when she remembered hearing Mutti cry out in pain. She'd tried to go to her, but Granny and a nurse held her back and she had to stay with her papa in the other room, the heat from the fire closing in on her and blasts of cold, icy air from the open window freezing her hands and feet. Papa had put her on the floor and left her there. He'd lit a cigarette and drunk a glass of schnapps with shaking hands. Then the terrible noise stopped, but instead of everything getting better it got much worse. Granny wailed, Papa slumped into a chair; the nurse threw horrible, mucky sheets onto the fire and mopped the bedroom on her hands and knees. Margarete had cried, too. She was hungry and wanted a drink. Her dress was dirty and she needed to be changed. If only someone would read to her. But most of all, she wanted her mama.

Then Granny scooped her up, stopped to lay her hand on her son's shoulder and took her across the city to her house. Every day she hoped her father would come to take her home — or to visit her at the very least — then one day Granny told her, in a quiet, confidential voice, 'He was taken by the Nazis, Liebling. I know he was. Nothing else would have kept him from you.'

One afternoon, on her way home from the shops, she was sure she'd seen him. His back was to her, and his face was pushed close to another man's who he was deep in conversation with, but she was sure it was him because she saw his large, outspread feet and sticking-out ears. She hurried past, her breathing jagged and hot tears pressing into the backs of her eyes. The realisation that he'd completely rejected her had made her feel woozy and she'd had to grab onto a brick wall. Something foul tasting came into her mouth and she was barely able to stop herself from heaving it onto the pavement. But eventually she consoled herself with the fact that her grandmother wanted her. She loved her and did her best to keep her safe. But a couple of years later Granny had died and someone — the doctor probably — had taken her to the orphanage.

Most of the children had stopped crying, although a lot of snivelling and whining, as soft as whispers, echoed around the carriage. A pretty young woman was making her way from child to child. She sat and chatted to each of them in turn and handed out small bottles of milk and sliced sausage wrapped in bread rolls. The closer she got to Margarete, the more intoxicating the heady aroma of fatty meat and yeast became. She hadn't eaten anything since a bowl of sloppy porridge early that morning, most of which she'd left because of the griping, nervous pains in her stomach. Her mouth filled with saliva and she touched her face to make sure it hadn't waterfalled down her chin.

'Is there room for me?' the young woman asked when it was Margarete's turn.

Margarete slid along the seat as far as she could.

'My name is Fraulein Helga and I will be with you all the way to England. All right?'

Margarete was mesmerised by the woman's smile that parted her lips to show a set of straight, white teeth. The smell of the sausage in the basket was very distracting, too. All she managed was a nod of her head.

'Now, who have we here? Ah yes — Margarete Bauer. Number 7004,' She read the name and number off the ID tag. 'And you are twelve years old.' She appraised Margarete from the corner of her eye, no doubt thinking her large and ungainly for her age, which was true. 'Let me check your name against my list.' She guided a pencil down the column of names, found Margarete's and made a mark next to it.

'I have been told that soldiers or other officials will board from time to time and they might want to have a look at some of our identification tags, but I will be with you so please don't be worried. And who is this little one?' A sudden stab of fear struck Margarete under her ribs when Fraulein Helga put out her hand to touch the angelic-looking girl's face. What if it was decided that someone else would be better suited to caring for the child? If that happened, the place against her chest would be empty and cold again. She tightened her grip with enough pressure to make the Fraulein withdraw her hand.

Instead, the woman turned over the tot's name tag and read it aloud. 'Oh, Ilse Bauer.' She looked with surprise at Margarete. 'Four years old. What a strange coincidence — you could be sisters, except for the fact that

you come from different orphanages. Her name is not listed, but I will add it now. Well, you certainly seem to have a way with her like a big sister would,' Fraulein Helga carried on. 'Do you think you can look after her for the entire journey?'

All the way to England. That sounded wonderful. Exactly the sort of duty an older sister would perform. Margarete swallowed down her excitement. 'Yes, Fraulein. I can do that. I often took care of younger children in my orphanage.'

'Very well. But if I notice you getting tired or overwhelmed, I will take over. Now, how about something to eat and drink?' She reached down into the basket.

All of Margarete's appetite fled and panic replaced it. She wanted — needed — the little girl to stay with her. It seemed as though she was now her responsibility. Fraulein Helga could look after any other child in the carriage — each and every one of them would love to be taken care of by her. But who did Margarete have? No one except Ilse, and the link to her was flimsy at best. For a frenzied moment, her head buzzed with the chaos of the situation. What could she say? What could she do? There must be some way. Without a thought for the consequences she blurted out, 'She is my sister. I am sure of it.' It was only a partial lie. She'd nearly had a brother or sister once, after all.

Fraulein Helga looked up from her basket. 'She is?'

'Yes.' Margarete thought quickly and nodded her head for emphasis. 'Fraulein Thiess told me that I had a sister but we had been separated after Granny died,' she gabbled on. 'No one seemed to know where she was or who she was with.' Margarete glanced at the Fraulein to see if she was taken in by the story.

'But . . .' Fraulein Helga's eyes were wide with surprise. 'Why didn't anyone look for her so you could be reunited? That would have been usual procedure.'

Margarete shrugged, thankful to have learned when it was best to play at being an innocent child. 'Maybe because of . . . all the broken glass,' she said.

Tears filled Fraulein Helga's eyes. She put her hand on Margarete's arm and looked into the distance. 'Yes, indeed. And this whole terrible situation.

But something good has come out of it for you two sisters. You have found each other!’ She crossed her hands over her heart and inhaled deeply.

All Margarete could do was nod again and wonder how she had got away with telling such a bold untruth. She might well get found out — Fraulein Thiess said liars always got their comeuppance — and perhaps she would, too, when one of the soldiers along the way checked their papers or by whomever would be waiting for them in England. But for now, little Ilse was tucked up close to her, which made both of them feel safe and cared for. Suddenly, she was so hungry and thirsty that she thought she might keel over if she stood up.

‘Your meal at last,’ Fraulein Helga said, producing the milk and sausage sandwich. ‘Shall I give you Ilse’s to take care of until she wakes? Poor little thing, she must be so tired to sleep through all this.’

‘Thank you.’ Margarete reached out for the food.

‘You won’t go eating her share, will you?’ Fraulein Helga said playfully. ‘I know what sisters can be like.’

Margarete shook her head. She knew she would never do that to Ilse, who could have anything of hers, without an argument, whenever she wanted it.

Chapter 3

Wednesday 14 December 1938

Margarete

Fraulein Helga distributed a few books, pencils and tattered games to amuse the children who were still bravely trying to staunch their tears. Margarete watched as the weak winter sun reached its zenith and slowly began to descend behind the grey clouds. The next dilemma she had to overcome was what to tell Ilse when she woke. No doubt she would be disorientated, which might lead to her wriggling away from Margarete in alarm. And given how easily the child had fallen into her arms, she might well do the same with someone else she didn't know. All Margarete could do was keep repeating that she was Ilse's big sister, who was going to take care of her, and then win the girl's trust by doing exactly that.

The train came to a sudden stop on the outskirts of what looked like a large city. It seemed to Margarete that they'd been travelling for ages and she looked around for signs that they were in a different country, but none were apparent. Then Ilse stirred and stretched her arms and legs. Margarete wanted to get this next hurdle over and done with, but she began to sweat and wonder what she would do if it all went wrong. The worst that could happen was that she would be found out, chastised and separated from Ilse, then she would be on her own again. It would be heartbreaking and, even after such a short period of caring for the little girl, difficult to bear.

She took a deep breath and whispered, 'Hello, Liebling,' when Ilse's puffy eyelids opened a fraction and revealed a slice of deep blue.

'Hello,' Ilse said in a small voice. She sat quite still and looked around as if what she saw was blurred at the edges. Then she shot up straight and gave Margarete a hard stare. 'Want my Fraulein. Go away!' she demanded, her eyes wide with fear as she dug her fingernails into the older girl's arm. If one of the orphanage children had done that, Margarete would have screamed out and repaid them with worse. But she held her breath and told herself that she understood little Ilse's terror. She gently removed the child's grip, and said, 'Everything is fine, Ilse. I am Margarete, your sister.'

Ilse shook her head and narrowed her eyes. 'No, don't have one,' she said stubbornly.

‘But wouldn’t you like one?’ Margarete asked. She imitated Fraulein Helga’s smile and jiggled Ilse’s shoulders encouragingly.

Ilse thought for a moment. ‘Maybe,’ she replied, sounding confused.

‘Well,’ Margarete said. ‘I have always wanted a sister, too. And we are so lucky because we have found each other.’

‘My sister?’ Ilse sounded amazed. She put the raggedy doll over her hand and turned its lopsided face towards her.

‘That is right. And you know what a big sister will do, don’t you?’

‘Play. With me.’ A smile spread across Ilse’s face.

‘Of course,’ Margarete said encouragingly. ‘And help you to get food when you are hungry and wash your face and read to you. I am going to take care of you all the way to England.’ A shiver ran through her when she thought about what might happen there, but that was something she wouldn’t share with Ilse. She hugged the little girl close to her again. ‘You have been asleep next to me for such a long time. We have been cosy, haven’t we?’

Ilse plugged her thumb in her mouth and nodded.

‘And together we will be safe. Just keep close and, if anyone asks, tell them we are sisters, all right?’

Ilse’s eyes no longer betrayed an inkling of suspicion, which was a good start. ‘Now, are you hungry?’

The thumb fell to Ilse’s chest, where she wiped it on her dress. ‘Yes,’ she said.

Margarete produced the milk and bread roll, and Ilse’s little fingers wrapped around them. ‘Thank you,’ she said in her childish voice, and Margarete was relieved to think she’d hooked the little girl with the comfort and kindness she would do her very best to provide.

Ilse contentedly took a large bite from her sandwich. ‘I like it,’ she said, then offered the corner to her sock doll. ‘Eat, Kathe,’ she lisped. ‘We don’t know when we’ll eat next.’

Margarete laughed. She imagined that was what the Fraulein at Ilse’s orphanage had instructed. Fraulein Thiess used to say the same thing. ‘Good girls, both of you. I was going to ask you what your doll’s name is, now I know. Did you make her?’

‘With Renate.’ The little girl’s lips wobbled and she sat up tall, scanning the carriage. Margarete felt a pang of worry that Renate might be a

real sister or cousin that Ilse would run to, abandoning her without a second thought.

‘Eat up,’ Margarete said, distracting her charge. ‘Isn’t it lovely?’

Ilse smiled again, rubbed her stomach and licked her lips.

Margarete put her arms around the little girl and laughed as she watched her carefully. No wonder mothers and grandmothers fussed over little ones. She was in awe of every mouthful Ilse took and was ready to mop up the tiniest of crumbs or spills.

Together, they looked out of the window. Ilse pointed tirelessly at everything they passed and asked, ‘What’s that?’

‘A horse and cart,’ Margarete answered without a trace of impatience.

‘Why?’

For a moment Margarete was stumped, but just as she began to explain, Ilse moved on.

‘That one.’

‘A very long hedgerow.’

‘That.’

‘A cosy house.’

‘Why?’

‘Because people need to live somewhere.’

‘There.’ Ilse pointed indiscriminately.

Anger caused Margarete to feel unforgiving when she saw black, broken holes winking at them from a large building on the outskirts of Hamburg. *How dare they*, she thought. She was outraged for herself, but even more so for the effect of the broken windows on Ilse. But if the child had noticed anything wrong, she didn’t say a word. Margarete wondered where she had been that terrible night and what she’d seen and heard.

She tightened her hold on Ilse and pressed her cheek against her head. No doubt the girl carried around a good many cuts and bruises and scars, exactly like the ones that tormented Margarete. Not the kind you could see on knees and elbows but the ones deep inside that you kept to yourself. One of those lacerations might be the reason Ilse had put her hands out so readily to Margarete. Perhaps, once upon a time, she’d had an older sister who’d disappeared or been dragged away or who had abandoned her, like she’d been deserted by her father. What traumas had she suffered? The thought of who or what might have hurt Ilse made a lump harden in

Margarete's throat. Out of the corner of her eye, she studied the other children and knew that, like her, they had all suffered agonies and were doing so now. But no one had ever questioned her about her past experiences and now was not a good time to ask Ilse about hers. There was no point in reopening old wounds on this long journey to what they had been told would be a safer place.

One of the grown-ups pulled down the blinds and dimmed the lights. A freezing draught whistled its way in from around the doors, and the windows rattled when the train went over a seam in the track. Threadbare blankets were tucked around as many children as possible and the little ones were told to go to sleep. Ilse, who was tired despite her earlier nap, dropped off with the help of her thumb. Margarete felt as though her whole body was filled with something heavy, but every time she succumbed to sleep she twitched herself awake. She could not risk someone taking Ilse from her.

After one such episode, Fraulein Helga came and sat next to her. 'You need to sleep as well, Margarete,' she said.

'Yes,' Margarete agreed. 'But I have only just found my sister and I do not want to let her go.'

'That's all very well, but while it's quiet why don't you lie down next to Ilse and let yourself nap. We will be on a boat soon and then it might be more difficult.'

Shockwaves pulsed through Margarete. She'd had no idea that they would be getting on a boat — although now she thought about it, there was no other way for them to cross the water unless they grew fins or wings. With those images in her mind, she let Fraulein Helga put a jacket under her head and cover her and Ilse with a large piece of rough cloth. A child called out in his sleep and the Fraulein went to soothe him. There were night odours like those she'd been used to in the orphanage: musty breath, traces of food being digested, damp hair and unwashed feet. She held Ilse to her and the little girl grasped Margarete's hand with her own. The rhythm of the train could have been a song or one of the poems that Fraulein Thiess had recited to her over the years. This time, when her eyelids drooped downwards, she allowed them to stay closed.

Suddenly a heavy *thunk, thunk, thunk* filled the carriage. The sound of leather boots clomping down the aisle. Then, without any warning, a soldier was standing over them. Within seconds Margarete was wide awake. She

jolted into a sitting position, pulling Ilse up with her. The officer was short but still much taller than the children, of course. His hair was oiled, his shoulders were wide, and what looked like black wires covered the backs of his hands. He reminded Margarete of an ogre from one of the bedtime fairy tales a teacher had sometimes read aloud to the children. Her stomach turned over and her legs started to twitch.

Fraulein Helga and the other grown-ups stood, documents tight in their hands. 'Heil Hitler,' the officers said.

Without hesitation the adults saluted in return, although Margarete noticed that Fraulein Helga allowed herself to be distracted by something at her feet.

'As you can see,' the Fraulein said, 'all of the documents are in perfect order.' She held her lists out towards him. 'Here you have—'

'Sit down, Fraulein.' The officer sounded as much of a bully as he looked. 'I will call you when I want you.'

With a rebellious stance, their chaperone stood her ground. But the officer leered at her with icy eyes until she obeyed his order and sat on the edge of a seat.

'What have we here?' the first officer said, even though he must have seen the same in each carriage he'd menaced his way through. 'So many children.' He raised his voice. 'Where are you going, children?' He strolled through the carriage as if he were taking the air on a seaside promenade. 'You.' The officer suddenly pointed to a small boy. 'What is your destination?'

'England,' the child managed to stammer.

'Well done.' The officer turned his attention on Margarete. 'Your tag.'

She held out the document hanging around her neck. She wouldn't be surprised if she — or any of them — wet themselves.

'No,' he barked. 'Take it off and hand it to me.'

'The children are not allowed to—'

'Did I ask you?' the officer shouted.

Fraulein Helga shook her head.

'Then keep quiet.'

'You, do as I say. Hand me your label.'

Margarete had never thought of the tag in that way. But with its details and number, she supposed it implied that she had indeed been labelled,

like . . . like a *thing*, not a person. She glanced at Fraulein Helga for help and the woman, mouth pursed, instructed her to obey the order. It felt as if a terrible weight on her chest was leaving very little room for air to squeeze in around it. If this cruel man kept her ID, or set a match to it, or tore it to shreds and threw it out of the window, she would be a nobody — not even a label or a number. A nobody with no one to look after her, nowhere to live, no school, no money, no past, present or future. She could feel the blood draining from her face.

‘My sister,’ Ilse suddenly piped up.

Margarete drew her close.

The man’s eyebrows shot up when he got a good look at the tiny girl and the glimmer of a smile crossed his face. Then he dared to put his thick, callused hand on Ilse’s cheek and slowly traced it downwards to her jaw. ‘Who?’ he asked. ‘Show me.’

Ilse put her palm tenderly on Margarete’s shoulder.

‘No,’ the officer said. ‘That cannot be so. Show me your tag.’

Margarete could not bear the thought of this rough man touching Ilse again, so she unwound the string from the younger girl’s neck and handed it to him.

‘Ha.’ He addressed Fraulein Helga. ‘There has been a mix-up. These children are from different orphanages, so they cannot possibly be sisters.’ He stroked his chin. ‘Perhaps this whole sorry set-up is flawed and all the children will have to be turned back.’

Margarete felt a flash of dread. She was frightened about going to England, but she knew that was a safer option than returning to the broken glass of Berlin.

Fraulein Helga jumped up and explained the situation in a rushed, jumbled manner. Her face was pale and her lips trembled, but she carried on without hesitation. The officer became impatient and motioned for her to stop talking. For a moment too long, he moved his gaze between the two girls: Margarete with her mousey hair, uninspiring brown eyes, an inflamed spot on her cheek and ears that stood out too far; and the dainty, doll-like Ilse. But they were sisters. Both girls said they were and Fraulein Helga believed them. All they had to do was stick to their story.

The officer shook his head. ‘Two sisters. One pretty. Almost Aryan.’ Margarete was filled with loathing for the way he looked at Ilse. She pulled

the little girl close and laid her chin protectively on her head. ‘The other — plain and homely. This’ — he turned to another officer — ‘is just another example of how the Jews try to hoodwink us. Good riddance to them.’ He shrugged and let the tags drop into Margarete’s lap. With fumbling fingers she picked them up and placed them back around their necks.

‘And by the way’ — the officer turned back at the door and sneered one last time — ‘Happy Hanukkah.’

Margarete flopped back down, closed her eyes and rocked Ilse back to sleep. She knew the officer hadn’t meant what he’d said — if anything, he wished them the opposite of good times. If he had his way, there would never again be another Hanukkah for them to observe. She knew that, if they’d stayed in the orphanage, they would have had to whisper the words to Ma’oz Tzur behind heavily curtained windows and locked doors when the celebrations started in three days’ time. They would have been reduced to a quiet, secretive game of dreidel, shared a few latkes and watched Fraulein Thiess light the Menorah candle with quivering hands. Even in the fear and silence, it would have been comforting. Perhaps they would celebrate the holiday in England, where they could perform the yearly rituals without dread. That thought made Margarete feel light and buoyant and a tumble of excitement helped to untangle the taut nerves in her stomach.

In the dead of night, the train slipped away from the station. Margarete peeked around the window blind and she could just make out the Wehrmacht officers standing on the platform, their arms raised in their vile salutes and what looked like fragments of silvered glass reflected in their shiny boots.

Chapter 4

Thursday 15 December 1938

Margarete

At every stop along the way, officers boarded the train and checked labels and lists. None were as belligerent as the first had been, but when morning came Margarete was even more of a mother hen towards Ilse than she had been before that terrifying incident, if that were possible. And the younger child helped the situation along of her own accord. If they happened to get separated for a moment, her mouth would wobble and she would call out, 'Margarete, my sister.' It seemed as though everyone now accepted the story that Margarete had woven, some of them even helping Ilse to find Margarete and making room for the two girls to be together in queues for snacks and drinks.

It happened so quickly, this deference to the concocted story, that Margarete sometimes slipped into thinking that perhaps she hadn't made it up after all. Maybe it was the truth, or partly the truth. Of course, when it was quiet and she had a few moments to think about it, she knew in her heart that couldn't possibly be the case, but Ilse fitted so perfectly under her arm and had taken so willingly to the story that she wondered if the random chance of them sharing a surname was not really so much of a coincidence. With those thoughts weaving through her mind, she began to relax into the assurance that somehow or other they would be able to stay together in England. If a Wehrmacht officer couldn't part two little girls, no one could, could they? Especially when one was so adorable and constantly reminded everyone in a high-pitched voice that she needed her older sister by her side.

Margarete held Ilse's hand and they lined up behind the other children waiting to use the toilet and have a quick wash. She heard the grown-ups repeating the word *Niederlande*, despite their attempts to keep their voices low — so sometime during the night they must have crossed the border into Holland. 'Let's look out for tulips and windmills,' Margarete whispered to Ilse.

'Why?' Ilse asked as she jiggled her legs up and down.

‘They are the symbols of this country.’ Margarete did her best to describe them to Ilse, but there was nothing beyond the windows for miles except dark earth and a horizontal line where land met sky in the distance.

Ilse fidgeted on Margarete’s lap and yawned so widely that her eyes watered. But after what felt like for ever, the smell of brine floated in with the draught and Margarete guessed they were near the sea. That thought caused excitement and fear in equal measure. They’d been told they were going to England for protection and yet, at the same time, they were moving further and further away from everything they had ever known. But Berlin was no longer the place of safety it had once been, she reminded herself. The broken windows had seen to that.

She’d never seen the sea, let alone travelled over it, and it was impossible to imagine herself at the mercy of the waves. Then there was Ilse and the anxiety about what would happen to them when they arrived in England. Intense pain stabbed her stomach. She knew there was every possibility they would be separated, although she would fight with all she was worth not to let that happen. She was so tired. Each stage of the journey brought different worries to eat away at her.

Although most of the children would not have been able to recognise the smell of salt in the air, the tang and the change in atmosphere made them skittish. Some strained to look out of the windows, others giggled and chattered loudly.

‘Children.’ Fraulein Helga stood in the middle of the carriage. ‘Soon we will come to a halt in a place called Haken von Holland.’

‘Is that the hook, Fraulein Helga?’ a boy asked, pointing to an enormous metal hook on the end of a crane. His face coloured when a few of the children laughed, but the Fraulein said it was a very good question.

‘No,’ she said. ‘The land that sticks out into the sea is the hook and that is the port from which we will sail to England. Isn’t that exciting?’

Some of the children oohed and aahed, but Margarete wasn’t too sure, although for Ilse’s sake she wouldn’t show her apprehension.

More than one crane studded with tiny twinkling lights stood to attention on the docks. The large pieces of apparatus mesmerised the children for a moment, until the train crawled into the station and a group of smiling women waved at them from the platform. They were holding banners that read *Willkommen in Holland, Kinder!* The Dutch ladies had

evidently made an effort to welcome the children in their own language, which made tears spring to Margarete's eyes.

Spiralling through the smell of the sea was the scent of something sweet, perhaps wafting from the huge vat that stood on the platform beside the women. The cloying aroma seemed to coat Margarete's mouth and nostrils and she hoped she would get a taste of whatever it was.

'Now,' Fraulein Helga instructed. 'I will give each of you a partner who you must stay with. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Fraulein Helga,' the children chanted.

'Make sure to take all your belongings with you because we will not be coming back onto this train.' She sounded nervous. 'When the lovely ladies have given all of us a snack, we will be boarding the boat. Stay in line. Do not lose sight of the grown-ups. And please, please, *please* — do not remove your name tags.'

Margarete made sure Ilse's tag was around her neck and they both put on their ragged coats. 'Have you got Kathe?' she asked.

'Here she is.' Ilse laughed as she playfully produced the pitiful sock from behind her back.

'Keep her with you,' Margarete instructed. 'And I will keep both of you safe.'

Fraulein Helga put the children into pairs and they formed a snake down the middle of the carriage.

When she came to Margarete, she said, 'Of course you two will stay together.'

Margarete had not doubted that. And if it had been decided otherwise, she would have objected until the Fraulein acquiesced. So Margarete held on tight to Ilse's hand and, when it was their turn to leave the train, she saw that each child in front of them was receiving a mugful of something from the urn. She could tell it wasn't tea or coffee or soup, but she couldn't make out what it was.

Ilse's eyes widened when she got a whiff of the heady aroma. 'Smells yummy. For us?'

Margarete felt faint with longing. 'We will have to wait our turn and see,' she said. 'But I hope so.'

Together they shuffled towards the head of the queue, where one of the cheerful ladies greeted them in what Margarete supposed must be Dutch.

She couldn't understand a word and became alarmed that it would be much harder when everyone around her was speaking English. The woman opened her mouth to speak again and luckily Fraulein Helga translated for them. 'Dear children. We are so happy to have you here in Holland.' The woman was wearing a purple flowered apron over her coat and held a ladle in her hand. She beamed broadly at them and then proudly exclaimed in German, '*Heisse Schokolade?*' Hot chocolate! Margarete could hardly believe what she was hearing — that the kind lady had learned the German words, or that this was really what was bubbling away in the pot.

They stood frozen to the spot on the freezing cold platform. In the distance the mournful moan of a foghorn sounded and mist gathered around the tops of the cranes. They couldn't find a way to answer. It seemed too absurd an offer to be real. 'You may say, "Yes, please",' Fraulein Helga encouraged them. 'We must always remember our manners, mustn't we?'

Given permission, they fell over themselves to say, 'please' and 'thank you' and receive their cups of precious, molten chocolate.

Fraulein Helga ushered them under a tarpaulin, where they huddled together with the other children. Margarete first made sure Ilse was holding her mug tightly and watched while she brought the sweet drink to her mouth. When she emerged from her first sip, a dark moustache framed her wide smile. She hadn't seen such a beam from her before. The girl patted her stomach, licked her lips and said, 'I like it.'

No longer able to contain herself, Margarete ducked into her mug and the rich, milky taste swirled around in her mouth. She had never tasted anything quite so delicious and without any other thought she released a soft bubble of laughter. Ilse copied her and soon others joined in. The lovely Dutch ladies were thrilled by their reaction, and a few of them clapped as if the children had put on a performance.

Margarete wished the mug was bottomless, but eventually they had to hand back their cups and march in line to the ferry. It loomed large out of the descending fog, much bigger than Margarete had imagined, and it was unfathomable that such a huge vessel could keep afloat. The gangplank squealed and swayed as they tramped over it. When Margarete looked down between the planks, the swell made her feel queasy and off balance. Ilse lost her footing and began to cry, so Margarete scooped her into her arms. The

wind whipped around them and the strands of hair that Margarete had pulled free of her plaits flailed her face.

At last they reached the inside of the boat, where a man in a dark uniform showed them to a lovely warm cabin with — Margarete could not believe her eyes — beds made up with blankets and clean, white sheets. *I feel as though I am in heaven*, she thought, and all the fear drained from her. A small round window showed them foamy white waves that lapped towards the boat and Margarete wished they didn't have to see outside, although her eyes were drawn to the turbulent water.

Ilse jumped and covered her ears when a blast from a funnel overhead sounded and the ferry began to move. It was calm at first, but soon they were heaved from side to side and up and down, which was alarming, but Margarete tried to stay composed for Ilse.

Fraulein Helga knocked on the door and brought each of them a cookie and a drink of water. Much to Margarete's relief, she then drew the curtains across the window, blocking out the murky sea and sky.

There were dark, puffy circles under the Fraulein's eyes and not a trace of lipstick was left on her mouth. Her lovely face was ashen and her hair dishevelled. 'Goodnight, children.' She smiled at each of them, but stopped to pat Margarete's arm.

Margarete tucked Ilse into the bottom bunk and the little girl clung onto her neck for a moment. 'Margarete, my sister,' she said in a low, sleepy whisper.

By the time Margarete climbed above her, the child was fast asleep. Margarete thought her heart was beating too fast to settle and she tossed first one way, then the other, as if she were floating on top of the sea without a boat beneath her. Then she succumbed to the swaying motion and the smell of the clean sheets, drifting off until morning.

Chapter 5

Friday 16 December 1938

Margarete

Eggy bread and a piece of apple were put into their hands while they stood on deck the following morning. The sea was calm and benign; wispy clouds wandered across the sky. In the distance, land loomed towards them, but now Margarete wished she could stay on this boat for ever with Ilse by her side. She would happily go back and forth to the Hook of Holland, sleep each night in what she considered to be an opulent cabin and have wonderful food given to her every few hours. Ilse would learn everything she knew and she, in turn, would be taught by the kind, beefy men who took care of the boat.

But that could never be the case. They had been reminded a number of times by Fraulein Helga that they were lucky to be on course for England and in her heart she knew that to be true — although it was hard to envisage what life would be like there, so the thought was rather vague and frightening, too.

A spontaneous cheer burst from the grown-ups and older children when the ferry docked. They were in England now, and Margarete allowed herself a fragment of relief: there was no broken glass to cower from here.

Fraulein Helga told them they would be boarding yet another train to a station in London called Liverpool Street. The words had made her mouth stumble and stick and she laughed about that. ‘My English is not very good,’ she said. ‘But soon, living in England, all of you will speak the language perfectly.’

Margarete didn’t know how that could be so. The voices around her sounded as if they were babbling nonsense. She thought it would take a very long time to learn a different language and she worried about how she would ask for what she needed until then or understand what the English grown-ups expected from her. They might punish her if she didn’t do what she was told, or take away her food or make her do exhausting chores. And as for poor little Ilse . . . The fear of any of those things happening to her made Margarete’s legs shake with fear. It might have been better, in the long run, to have fled on her own in Berlin and faced the shattered glass.

But then she would never have met her sister. She wiped her damp palms on her dress and pulled down the sleeves of the little girl's coat to cover her wrists.

As the last leg of the journey began, the children were as subdued as they were when their train neared the Hook of Holland — they knew something significant was going to happen soon, but they couldn't imagine how it would unfold. The day before they'd left, Fraulein Thiess had told them that foster parents, or sponsors, would claim them at Liverpool Street. The children had been sitting on the floor, their legs crossed and arms folded. The piece of hair Margarete had worked loose dangled down her cheek and every once in a while she twirled it around her finger, then let it spring back. 'They are kind people who have volunteered to allow you to live with them and keep you safe. This is very good, don't you think?'

After the terror of the breaking glass, it sounded idyllic. But once in bed, Margarete had wondered how there could be any guarantee that these people were kind. All there was to go on was their word and anyone could say they were this, that or the other, but in private no one would be the wiser if the opposite were true.

Rain spattered against the train windows and left dirty streaks behind as they moved through the damp landscape towards London. Ilse sat on Margarete's lap and she spoke to her in a soft, reassuring voice. 'We are nearly there now.'

'Where?'

'London,' she said. 'Soon we will meet our foster parents and I am sure they will be kind to us. If they are not, I promise I will do something about it.'

Ilse stroked Kathe across Margarete's arm.

A girl of about Margarete's age, with teeth that stuck out, leaned over and hissed at her, 'What makes you think you and your sister will stay together?' She pointed to the toothy girl sitting next to her. 'Me and my twin are going to different families. Anyway, don't you understand that your sponsors will have been sorted out way before you found your Ilse? *Stupid girl.*'

Margarete's eyes widened. Why hadn't she thought of that before?

The girl stuck her tongue out spitefully and Ilse, who had been watching and listening, put hers out in retaliation. 'My sister,' she said as

Margarete's protector this time.

Margarete flopped back against the seat and felt herself diminishing once again to nothing more than a small and powerless *thing*. That was it then — no matter what she and Ilse said or did at the station in London, they would be parted for sure. The thought made Margarete feel bereft, as if someone had died.

* * *

It was pitch black when the train arrived at Liverpool Street and not even the paper Christmas decorations hung about the station looked cheerful. 'Now, children,' Fraulein Helga instructed, her voice laced with relief. 'Hold onto your partner's hand and follow me.' Too overawed and exhausted to do otherwise, the children trailed behind. Other passengers stared as they passed by, but not vindictively as they had in Berlin. Some of them smiled and said, 'Welcome,' which sounded enough like the German *willkommen* for the children to understand. Margarete hoped other English words would be as easy to recognise.

They followed the Fraulein to a large area behind a curtain, where they were told to sit on long benches and were given cups of milky tea with sugar — a horrible concoction, in Margarete's opinion. But her stomach was churning with hunger, so she drank it regardless and ate the piece of sticky tart that went with it.

A long line of smartly dressed, rather anxious looking grown-ups waited at a table for the names of their foster children to be read aloud so they could be united with them.

Margarete and Ilse watched as some sponsors embraced their child and were given a cursory hug in return. Some stroked their new charge's hair or put a large, protective hand on his or her shoulder. One man, with the beard and hat of a rabbi, mumbled a blessing. As each child left, Ilse waved Kathe at them and said, 'Bye bye.'

A number of children's names were called out and, with each one she heard, Margarete's nerves screamed with tension. A battle raged within her. She wanted to get the moment over and done with and yet she never wanted it to arrive. But it did — in the form of a Mr and Mrs Kingfisher and their daughter of about nine or ten who stood with Fraulein Helga when Ilse's name was read out. A huge lump formed in Margarete's throat and a wave

of panic surged through her. If she seized Ilse's hand and ran around that table, then ducked underneath the curtains, they could run to an alley or backwater where she could take care of both of them. She was more than capable; she had proved herself all the way from Berlin. But Fraulein Helga came and kneeled in front of them. 'You must let each other go now,' she said kindly. 'I'm terribly sorry, but there is no sponsor for you today, Margarete. You will go to a lovely camp or hostel with the other boys and girls who haven't been fostered, until a family is found for you.'

Margarete glanced around at the children left behind. They were mostly teenagers, trying to hide their disappointment behind stoic faces. None of them was a lovely little poppet like Ilse, and Margarete didn't want to be a sister to any of them. Besides, she told herself, she already had a sister and she wanted to stay with her.

Fraulein Helga began to prise the girls apart and tried to bribe Ilse with promises of a garden to play in and a dog and sweet things to eat. But the child would have none of it. 'Margarete, *Meine Schwester*,' she said twice very softly, followed by a bellow that turned into a screech.

A film of tears coated Fraulein Helga's eyes, but she managed to get Ilse off Margarete's lap. Ilse dug her heels into the floor and twisted one way then another, all the time crying out for her '*Schwester*'. Margarete put her hands over her ears and buried her face in her elbow, but that wasn't enough to block out the wails from the doll-like child who had suddenly turned into a screaming harridan. She remembered the racket Ilse had made when she was carried onto the train in Berlin, but it was still truly unbelievable that so much noise could come out of such a tiny, frail child.

Ilse's foster parents tried their best to console her with hugs and back-pats, and kind-sounding words that of course Ilse could not understand, all to no avail. Mrs Kingfisher grabbed Kathe and waggled her in front of Ilse's face to show the little girl that at least her doll was happy, but Ilse furiously snatched Kathe back and pressed the worn piece of material to her chest. Then there was nothing left for them to do but pick her up and take her from the room. Their own daughter turned at the curtain and looked mournfully at Margarete, but followed behind her mother and father with slumped shoulders.

Margarete shuddered. She wished with all her heart she had never put up her hand to say that she would take care of Ilse or lied about them being

sisters. She made a vow never to fib again — it would always come back to bite you one way or another.

The ear-splitting commotion continued to reach her ears, fading with each step the foster family took. Eventually it would stop altogether and that would be the last she saw or heard of Ilse ever again, she felt sure of it.

But without warning, the curtain was suddenly pushed aside and the girl who had been with the Kingfishers ran to Fraulein Helga and said something that came out in a rush.

With wide eyes, the Fraulein marched over to Margarete and said, ‘Quickly! Grab your things. Oh — I remember now, you don’t have anything.’

She took hold of Margarete’s hand and the three of them ran towards the other side of the station.

‘What is happening, Fraulein Helga?’ Margarete panted. ‘Where are we going? Stop. You are hurting my arm.’

‘Quickly,’ Fraulein Helga repeated. ‘Before they change their minds.’

‘Who?’

‘The Kingfishers. They are going to take you, too.’

Chapter 6

Friday 16th December 1938

Judith

Mum would be very cross with me if she knew I was writing at this time of night, so I'm hiding under the bedcovers and scribbling by the light of a pocket torch. So much has happened that it's impossible to sleep — diary or no diary — and I simply must get it all down now.

I'm really not too worried about them catching me, though. Mum and Dad are too busy talking about today's events to come up and check on me, or any of us, for a good while yet. But they think that all they have to say is, 'Go to sleep,' and that will be that. They imagine my eyes will gently close without another worry or question or idea popping into my head, but my mind is buzzing with them. I could tiptoe downstairs and stick my head around the sitting room door but that wouldn't get me either a loving welcome or any answers. I can hear them from here, but can't make out much of what they're saying other than Margarete's and Ilse's names, the words *train*, *screaming*, *foolish*, *responsibility* and *Nazis*. I can count eighteen footsteps, a pause and then another eighteen, which means Dad's pacing the floor, and I can picture Mum sitting in a chair next to the fire with her legs tucked under her. And there goes another soggy sigh as the stopper pops out of the sherry decanter, so they're filling up their glasses yet again.

How many times have I mentioned in this diary that everything adults do and say is very confusing? One day I'll go back and count, but I think it must be hundreds. Last time it was to do with Mum complaining to Dad that she did not want to have dinner with Mr and Mrs Clarke. She didn't like how boastful Mrs Clarke was about her furniture or crockery or Mr Clarke's job. But she did go, and the following morning she wrote a thank-you note that was full of compliments and praise, which she got me to drop in the Clarks' letterbox. The flap on the envelope was tucked in rather than stuck down, so I don't think anyone could blame me for reading it.

Another thing I've noticed is that a good idea — at least, an idea that seems good at the time — can turn on a sixpence and land everyone involved in extremely hot water. One such example being the time Lucinda

Bevington and I cut each other's hair. I've already written about that in detail, so there's no need to go over the entire episode again.

When the announcement came on the radio for people to volunteer to foster children from Germany, Mum pounced on Dad. She said it would give me the brother or sister I so clearly needed. From my listening post I couldn't hear any reply from Dad, so I imagined him blinking behind his spectacles. But my own eyes nearly bugged out of my face and I thought my sharp intake of breath would have Mum running to catch me eavesdropping. A sister or a brother. I had pined for a sibling for years. It had never happened, though and I had resigned myself to it being just me and Daisy — who's on the bed next to me now, twitching in her sleep as if she's chasing a rabbit — forever. My stomach jounced around with excitement at the prospect, but I also felt a bit insulted at the way Mum had referred to me as 'needing' a sibling. As if something in me is lacking.

Then Dad started to reel off all the reasons why he thought the idea was impractical. First, most of the children were Jewish and we were Church of England, so that would be difficult. Next, we didn't speak German and the children, obviously, would not know English. Thirdly, what if the child and I didn't get along? Fourthly, how would we cope with the inevitable homesickness that would ensue?

I expect he came up with a lot of other reasons, but I didn't listen to any more after that. I knew that if Mum said she wanted one of the Kindertransport children, we would get one, and I was right.

With the help of Mrs Frost, our daily woman, we cleaned and aired and prepared the house. It was like a fun game, one I had often imagined but with a baby as the sibling instead of an older child. A girl would share my bedroom; a boy would have one of the other rooms. We wrote out a menu for the first tea; Dad varnished the swing; Mum told her friends and some of them followed her lead.

As the date drew near, I thought I might explode from excitement. We found out we would be getting a girl named Ilse Bauer, and I was glad she was only four as I wanted to be the oldest so I could teach her how to read and help with Daisy and cut out paper crowns for Christmas.

* * *

When the big afternoon arrived at last, everything went to plan — at first. I was let off school for the day and we caught the train to Waterloo then the Underground to Liverpool Street. I held hands with Mum and Dad and we all wore our best clothes. My stomach churned all the way there and Mum's hand was clammy in mine. When we first saw Ilse, she looked like one of those little girls in an advert for custard powder or Sunlight soap. The front of her wavy blonde hair was held back by a clip and her eyes were the colour of the sky on a cloudless July day. Everything about her was minuscule and sweet and loveable. All she had with her were the tatty clothes she was wearing and a filthy sock doll with frayed stitching for its face.

Then it all went haywire. I thought Ilse would rush into my arms, hold on tight and allow herself to be carried home, where she would become the little sister I'd never had. But she was already a younger sister to a big girl — who their chaperone called Margarete — and she was a bigger sister in every way. She was at least twelve, three years older than me, with large feet and hands and coarse dark hair that had been dragged out of its plaits. And the two girls had to be wrenched apart because they were clinging so tightly to each other.

When Mum and Dad tried to take Ilse by the hand and guide her towards the Underground, the deafening howls she let out filled the station and bounced around from the ears of one passenger to another, if the stares were anything to go by. She screamed Margarete's name and something that sounded like '*Schwester*' over and over again.

Mum crouched down and held her gently by the shoulders. She looked as confused as I had been when Ilse didn't run straight into my arms. 'Your sister cannot come with us,' Mum said. 'There isn't enough room at home. A bed hasn't been made up for her and we asked for one child so you and our little girl, Judith, can be like sisters.'

What Ilse heard must have been mumbo-jumbo and she wouldn't even look at Mum. Then, of all the silly things to do, Mum took the dolly from her and tried to pretend the sock was happy to be coming home with us. Ilse's face turned as red as a tomato and all the cajoling did was make her open her mouth wider and bellow louder. Spitfire flew from her lips and sprayed the fine coating of make-up on Mum's face. Her fists locked and her knuckles turned white. She anchored her heels to the floor and refused

to move. Dad's face matched the little girl's in colour and he ran a finger around the collar of his shirt. When he put his face close to hers and told her to come along, he enunciated each word slowly and loudly, as if that would help her to understand. It was very embarrassing and made Ilse draw her head back as if she were repulsed, although to her credit she didn't move the rest of herself an inch. Dad reached out and grasped Ilse's tiny hand in his oversized, beefy paw. But the tiny terror had other ideas and released a screech that almost drowned out the platform announcer, and it didn't stop at that, but got louder as she carried on.

I must admit to having felt rather in awe — what an admirable way to let the grown-ups know exactly how you're feeling! — but most of all I felt sorry for her and Margarete. I had stolen a long look at the big sister who was about to be left behind, and suddenly the situation wasn't fun or funny any longer. The game I'd been playing in my mind — of having a little sister of my own to play with — came to a sudden halt, replaced by the reality of poor Margarete, sitting with her hands over her ears, tears falling down her face. It made me feel sad and my little game seem silly.

In that moment, a fog lifted and I could suddenly see things in a different, much clearer way. What was before me was simply awful. Sometimes Mum and Dad annoy me, especially when they try to stop me from doing what I want, but all the same, if anything happened to take me away from them, I know I would be terribly upset. That's what must have happened to Ilse and Margarete to make them end up in the orphanage. On top of that, the poor girls had then been sent away from everything and everyone they knew, just because some other people had taken against them for being different. Mum sat me down and told me what the Nazis are up to, although I knew most of it already because I listen in to adult conversations. I know it was kind of Mum and Dad to offer to take Ilse, but it didn't seem as if it was really helping if that same act of kindness were to tear two sisters apart. I had only ever missed an imaginary sibling and that's not the same as having a real sister suddenly snatched away from you — which must be a thousand times worse. I felt very bad for Margarete and Ilse, but I knew exactly how we could put things right.

I pulled on Dad's coat and tugged at Mum's arm, but they wouldn't listen to me. I was even tempted to start a howling fit of my own, which they definitely would have noticed, but I knew that would only make

matters worse. One of them almost had to pull, the other push poor Ilse towards the Underground, but it didn't work. The child twisted herself like a slithery eel, grimaced wildly, continued to scream, and wiped her runny nose on Mum's sleeve. Finally, in a lull between Ilse's screaming fits and Mum and Dad's coaxing, I got a word in. 'Mum! Dad! I have an idea!'

They suddenly seemed to notice me and that stopped them in their tracks.

'Can't it wait, Judith?' Mum said, sounding exasperated.

'No,' I said, impatient myself. 'Why don't we take her sister, too?'

Dad blinked twice and looked at Mum. Her make-up had slipped and a sheen of sweat coated her top lip. Then she said, 'We could do that, Henry, couldn't we?' But she didn't wait for a decision from Dad before she said, 'Yes, we must . . . run back, Judith, and fetch Margarete.'

Their chaperone could not believe it, and nor could the big sister. None of us Kingfishers could quite believe it, either. But it really happened. We now have two German sisters tucked up in a single bed in the room next to mine. I hope they let me become their sister, too. Their piggy-in-the-middle sister. I really hope all of this doesn't go hopelessly wrong.

Chapter 7

Saturday 17 December 1938

Judith

I woke with a start this morning and immediately wondered if I'd imagined everything that had happened yesterday. Rain was beating against the window and I could tell without opening the curtains that the sky was a sheet of wintry grey.

Margarete and Ilse's bedroom door was ajar when I tiptoed to the bathroom — Daisy shaking her soft brown fur at my heels — and I could see them snuggled up together in bed. I slowed right down, hoping one of them would beckon me in, but no such luck. Ilse was fast asleep and, when Margarete turned to me at last, she looked frightened and her stare was icy. It gave me quite a chill.

Mum was making a breakfast of eggs and bacon and, after I let Daisy out into the garden and set up her food and water, I asked Mum if I should get the sisters. She looked relieved at that suggestion and I thought that perhaps she'd been so taken aback by Ilse's outburst yesterday that she didn't want to do anything that might upset the little girl again. Nor did I! So my stomach fluttered and my legs felt wobbly as I climbed the stairs. I tried to get Daisy, who had just come in from the garden, to trot along with me but she was too engrossed in her food bowl.

At the top of the landing, I heard the girls talking in German. It sounded like gibberish to me and I wondered if that was how our English sounded to them, although it's hard to imagine anyone not understanding English — it's ever so easy. I tapped gently on the door and pushed it open a tiny bit. Both sisters looked at me as if they were shocked to see me in my own home. I managed a smile, although it felt rubbery, as if my mouth was part of a mask.

The three of us stood and looked at each other. Me in my blue bib dress and long white socks, Margarete in a pair of my pyjamas that were much too small for her and Ilse in a new flannelette nightie. My hair was in two bunches but the sisters looked as if they had slept in a bush. Ilse dug her toes around in the rug, then moved closer to Margarete and reached for her

hand. I wish she would gaze up at me the way she looks at her sister — as if she trusts her completely. Hopefully she will one day soon.

I told them that as it was Saturday there was no school and Mum was making a special breakfast downstairs. Margarete nodded but I don't think she understood a word I said, and Ilse just stared as if I were from outer space. That same feeling of pity for them washed over me again but this time it was mixed up with a sense of helplessness. What could I do to make things easier for them? What would help me if I was in their position?

Last summer Mum had sent me along to a playacting course in a hall. I'd heard her tell Dad she thought it would be a good outlet for my love of the dramatic. I'm not sure it was, but I remembered the day we did mime and decided to put it to good use now. I mimed sitting at a school desk, followed by a good shake of my head with my arms crossed in an X. Then I mimicked someone getting dressed, someone cooking and someone sitting down to eat. Ilse started to giggle, and Margarete couldn't stop herself from joining in. That egged me on, and I began to make my actions and expressions even more elaborate, which was great fun. The girls stood and watched as I pretended, in turn, to brush my teeth and wash my face, then play games and read books.

Mum called up to ask how everyone was getting on and the three of us looked startled, as if we'd been caught misbehaving. I laid out a dress for Ilse, found some of my largest things for Margarete and pointed from the clothes to the two of them. Margarete went behind the open wardrobe door to change, so I thought I'd leave them to it. As I opened the door, the aroma of bacon filled the room. 'Mmm, can you smell that?' I asked, inhaling deeply. 'Oink, oink.' I snubbed my nose with the palm of my hand. 'Pork. Bacon. Delicious.'

Ilse showed her appreciation for the savoury smell by rubbing her tummy and licking her lips.

'Say the words,' I instructed. 'Oink, oink. Pig, pork, bacon.'

Suddenly Margarete shot out from her hiding place and screamed, 'Nein!' in a voice to match Ilse's when she was throwing a tantrum. I shot backwards as Margarete took a step towards me, my ears still ringing from the deafening shout. All she had on was a once-white vest and pants. Goosebumps stood out on her pasty thighs, and her face was pale to match. I could feel the colour draining from my face, too. She was furious and kept

shouting, 'Nein oink oink!' She crossed her arms in the shape of an X like I had, then stuck her fingers down her throat and mimed being sick. 'Yuck!' Then she said a whole spiel that I couldn't understand but which made Ilse's eyes grow wide.

I could only stammer sorry over and over again, but I could not fathom what I needed to be sorry about.

Margarete pulled Ilse to her and held on tight. 'Jüdisch,' she said, pointing from her chest to her sister's.

'My name!' I was delighted and touched my chest. 'Judith. You've learned my name.'

Margarete looked completely muddled and close to tears.

I pointed at myself and repeated my name. Then at each of the girls while I said their names, too.

'Margarete. Ilse,' Margarete said again. 'Jüdisch.'

I backed out of the room quickly and left them standing in the same spot, but the minute I walked past the threshold they started talking in German again. 'Nein oink, oink,' Margarete said again, disgust making the words curdle in her mouth. 'Jüdisch,' she repeated forcefully, then something that sounded like, 'Hanukkah', followed by a mumbo-jumbo of other words all mashed together. I felt a blush cover my face. For all I knew, they might have been saying horrid things about me. I felt a deep pang of hurt and didn't know how I would ever find out one way or another. Tears stung the backs of my eyes. Then I wondered if that was how they felt when we talked. The sinking stone of helplessness I'd experienced earlier plummeted deeper into the pit of my stomach.

With a shaking voice, I told Mum and Dad about what had happened and Dad explained a bit about kosher law, but it was very baffling. Then Mum said, 'That's all very well, but I thought they'd left that behind. It's going to make things very difficult if they won't eat pork. It's a big part of our staple diet. I'll bet the little one could be easily persuaded if her sister wasn't with her.' She shook her head rather regretfully and I wondered if Mum was having qualms about taking in Margarete as well as Ilse.

'Yes Helena, but let's be patient and give them some leeway for a little while, shall we? Put the girls' bacon in the meat safe for another day and make them porridge with honey instead.'

During breakfast, nothing at all was said about the incident — which, when I thought about it, was to be expected given the language difficulty. But when Margarete looked at me, I could see that the ice in her eyes had thawed a bit, and I liked to think she appreciated that I'd got the bacon off her and Ilse's plates for them.

Mum babbled on about helping the girls with their hair and toothbrushes. She and Dad fidgeted a bit and seemed to be quite uncomfortable. Mum said we would go to the shops in Woking later to buy things that Margarete needed, especially a school uniform and shoes.

'Woking,' I repeated. 'That's the name of the town we live in.' Then I tried my best to mime what was said by walking my fingers across the tablecloth and pretending to try on various items of clothing. Dad coughed a lot and blinked a couple of times, then asked me what on earth I was doing.

When I explained he said, 'That's clever of you, but the girls don't need to learn the finer points of stagecraft, they need to learn to speak English.' He blinked a few more times for good measure and looked as if he wasn't quite sure how he'd come to be where he was.

'School on Monday,' he said eventually, 'will be a good start as far as that's concerned.'

I sighed and mimed going to sleep twice, then holding a book and pencil in my hands. But that seemed to alarm Margarete. She nearly jumped out of her skin. Pointing to Ilse, she raised four fingers and crossed her arms over her chest. I didn't have a clue what she meant. Did she want Ilse to have four nights' sleep before she started school?

But Dad was first to translate the mime this time. 'Ah,' he said. 'I think she means that Ilse is too young to go to school. In Germany, children don't start until they're six.'

'Lucky!' I said, much to Mum's horror. I repeated the same performance again, but with six fingers and a questioning gesture.

Margarete nodded furiously, but I shook my head and held up four fingers again. Mum and Dad copied me — for emphasis, I suppose.

That made Margarete think for a little while, then her face lit up. She put her arm around Ilse and explained something to her in German. At first, the little girl looked bewildered, then she nodded her head and went back to cuddling her sock dolly.

Margarete beamed and acted out her and Ilse sticking together like glue, but I had no way of telling her that they would be in separate classrooms and I was glad about that — perhaps it was better that they didn't know beforehand.

With a jolt I recalled how I'd felt when I imagined my foster sisters were talking about me and how angry Margarete had been when she thought she and Ilse would have to eat pork. I worried it was too early for them to face school as some of the children could be cruel about anyone who didn't fit in. Had they been sent away from all that in Germany just to have it happen again here in England? That didn't seem right.

Then my tongue ran away with me, which Mum and Dad say happens much too often. I said that Ilse was so tired it looked as if someone had pinched the pouches under her eyes. If she was forced to go to school on Monday, she would start her wailing again, which meant that Margarete would not go either, so they might as well let all three of us stay home and I could teach them English.

Dad said that was not possible in one day.

I told him that I had a plan, which was at least partly true. And, I pointed out, it was nearly time for the Christmas holidays, so if we stayed home until after the New Year — which would also give us an opportunity to get to know each other — I could teach them quite a lot by then.

Dad shook his head and blinked at the same time. He called me a 'chancer', but Mum thought it was rather a good idea, so that settled it. No school until 1939. Now I must get a plan ready.

Chapter 8

Saturday 24 December 1938

Margarete

For the past week, everyone had been frantically preparing for Christmas. The house was a hive of baking, decorating and wrapping. In the high street, lights and paper chains festooned shop windows and the signs with numbers on — which Margarete thought must be price tags — were cut out in the shapes of bells or angels or Santa Claus, even though St Nicholas Day had come and gone.

Ilse loved all the hubbub, but Margarete wondered if she really knew what was going on. ‘Ilse,’ she asked. ‘Did you see the beautiful Christmas trees with lights on when you went for your walks in Berlin? There was one in Potsdamer Platz and another in front of the Reichstag. Do you remember?’

The little girl narrowed her clear blue eyes and thought for a moment. ‘Kind of.’ She shrugged and picked up Kathe.

Margarete thought she probably couldn’t remember one way or the other, seeing as she was so young.

‘If you did, you have probably forgotten,’ Margarete said. ‘It has to do with Christianity, which is what the Kingfisher family believes in. Most of the people here in England are Christians, too. I think. Anyway, Christmas is not part of the Jüdisch religion. We have Hanukkah, but that ends tomorrow and there has not been one single word said about it, although I have tried my best to mention it a few times.’ It was true. She’d felt both bold and helpless saying the word out loud with a question mark after it, but sadness, disappointment and anger brewed deep within her when there was no response other than a lame smile from Mrs Kingfisher or a pat on the head from Mr Kingfisher. She overheard Mrs Frost, their daily helper, repeating it softly among a tumbling torrent of other sentences. Despite Mrs Frost being thin and angular, with a rather pointed face, Margarete thought she seemed kind and sympathetic, but she really had no way of knowing if the woman was making fun of her or trying to help.

‘Am I Jüdisch?’ Ilse asked.

‘Yes,’ Margarete said, straightening Ilse’s collar. ‘We are sisters and both of us are Jüdisch.’

Ilse nodded. ‘Is our other sister Jüdisch?’

Margarete felt her entire body tense. ‘First of all,’ she said in a firm voice. ‘She is not our sister. And second, she has a name. Judi . . . Judis . . .’

The girls started to giggle. They found Judith’s name hard to pronounce.

‘I can see why you are so confused as it sounds like Jüdisch, doesn’t it? She is not, though. You can tell that because she eats pork.’ Margarete shuddered at the thought.

‘She is like a sister,’ Ilse said.

‘She wants to be our sister because she’s not lucky enough to have one of her own. Besides, neither of us knows what a sister should be like, as neither of us has had one until now.’

Margarete studied Ilse and wished she knew what was going on in her head. Again, she wondered if Ilse could remember a sister or brother, a mother or a grandparent. She didn’t want to ask because, if she could remember, that would complicate everything. After all, they would have been members of Margarete’s family, too. Instead, she imagined Ilse was thinking that Judith was kind and funny and helpful, and was wondering why she couldn’t be their sister just by saying she was. After all, in her little mind she might think that was what Margarete had done.

‘She’s going to take care of us at school,’ Ilse said. ‘She said so. That’s what sisters do.’

‘Yes.’ Margarete began to plait her hair. ‘But friends do that kind of thing, too. She can be our friend. A very good friend. But not our sister.’

Ilse sat on the bed and tried to copy the way Margarete deftly braided one strand of her long hair over another.

‘Almost right.’ Margarete laughed. ‘Try to keep the lengths separated with your fingers.’

Ilse soon lost interest and moved to the floor so Margarete could braid her hair for her. ‘I like that smell.’ Ilse rubbed her stomach and licked her lips.

‘Yes, it reminds me of Lebkuchen.’

‘With sugar on top.’ Ilse took a deep breath filled with the aromas of vanilla and spices. ‘Can we have some?’

Margarete shook her head. 'There will probably not be any. I do not think it is a part of Christmas here.'

Hand in hand they went downstairs, and were greeted by a tree — almost like the ones they'd been talking about, except this one stood bare in the corner of the sitting room. Heady smells wafted towards them from the kitchen and Judith was cutting something out of brightly coloured paper at the table.

'Margarete, Ilse!' Judith beamed and pointed at the empty chairs next to her.

Daisy ran towards them and sniffed their hands, but didn't waste any time in returning to guard her station at the kitchen door.

It was all very cosy, but Margarete felt unsure. She didn't want to do — or eat or sing or make — anything that would stop her from being Jewish. And she definitely didn't want to give Ilse the impression that it was all right to slip in and out of their religion. But maybe it was, given the circumstances. Where was the harm in cutting out shapes from paper or trying delicious food? Everyone was so happy and excited and she longed to feel the same for a day or two instead of being burdened with fears and worries.

Ilse pulled away from her and let Judith help her up onto a chair. She sat on her folded legs and chose a piece of green paper, ready to be shown what to do next.

'Margarete?' Judith looked as though she was hoping the older girl would sit with them.

Eager to join in, but not wanting to seem too enthusiastic in case one thing led to another and they were forced to eat pork or proclaim they were Christians, Margarete sat and waited her turn with the glue and scissors. Condensation ran down the windows and a lovely piece of music filled the house. Mrs Frost carried in boxes of trinkets that tinkled against each other.

Judith jumped down and ran to her. She squealed with delight when she opened one of them. 'Mum!' she shouted.

When Mrs Kingfisher opened the kitchen door, she looked so hot and bothered that Margarete thought she might melt into the floor. She said something and disappeared again while Judith gingerly lifted a glass ornament from its cardboard nest and hung it on a branch of the tree. 'Come on, Mum!' she called out again and this time Mrs Kingfisher joined them,

carrying a tray laden with three mugs and two glasses filled with an amber liquid.

A cup of the same lemony-tasting drink they'd been given once before was handed to them, but this time it had been warmed up, which Judith seemed to think was a special treat. She rubbed her arms after she'd had a sip and gave her mother a gluey kiss on the cheek. Whatever it was that Mrs Kingfisher was drinking must have been sticky, too, because it clung to the inside of the glass as if it had been made from a thick syrup. Mrs Kingfisher smiled and looked pretty as a flush crept across her cheeks.

'Mrs Frost.' Margarete recognised the name Mrs Kingfisher called towards the kitchen, but not what was said after that.

Then Mrs Frost appeared and took a glass of amber liquid from Mrs Kingfisher's outstretched hand. She said something like 'Cheers,' and clinked her glass against each of theirs.

'Cheers,' Judith repeated.

Margarete and Ilse tried their best to get the word out, but it sounded nothing like it should have done.

'Hanukkah?' Margarete tried again in a timid voice.

Judith looked at her mother, who said something and shook her head. Mrs Frost's smile tilted downwards and her eyes clouded with sadness as she put her hand on Margarete's head before returning to the kitchen.

Then the moment passed and fortified, Judith and Mrs Kingfisher began chattering to each other and opening box after box of twinkling ornaments. Each one they held up gave them a reason to say something and to gaze fondly at the trinket in their hands.

Margarete and Ilse sat side by side on the sofa and watched their foster mother and sister pluck red and green baubles, gold stars, tiny sparkling rocking horses and angels with wire halos — that looked like Ilse — from their resting places.

Margarete could tell that Ilse was desperate to inspect the treasures more closely. In between sips of her lemon squash, she fidgeted and peered over the furniture to get a better look. But Margarete held her back, afraid she might be too heavy-handed and damage the precious objects. Besides, Mrs Kingfisher hadn't beckoned them to join in and Margarete felt they were being kept on the side lines, just out of reach of the tight mother-and-daughter circle.

Despite the busy atmosphere and the warming drink, Margarete suddenly felt empty, and a chill ran up and down her spine. A hollow ache opened inside her and she missed . . . what exactly did she miss? The comfort of the orphanage as it used to be — not how it was in the days leading up to the night of broken glass. She wished Fraulein Thiess was nearby, but she could be on the other side of the world by now, if she'd had to flee, too. Being able to talk without desperate attempts at stage acting. And the lost days of Hanukkah — but that was all. There were many more things that she didn't miss.

She gave Ilse a hug and reminded herself that they had always been on the periphery. Being both Jewish and orphans meant she and Ilse had been pushed away to the margins of society. But until the glass was broken, she'd always been pulled back into the safety of the orphanage and her own religion.

Here, it seemed as though they were being pulled away from their customs and traditions and pushed towards a whole new way of life. Exhaustion overwhelmed her and she wondered if she and Ilse might be better off sitting in their room. No one had promised that any family kind enough to take them in would love and cherish them. They had been told they would have food to eat, somewhere to sleep and feel safe, and so far those expectations had been fulfilled. What did it matter if they didn't want to share their rituals? They had allowed her to stay with Ilse and saved her from a hostel that sounded as if it would have been no more than another draughty, cold orphanage.

Then Judith beckoned to them wildly, but Margarete wanted to wait for a gesture of invitation from Mrs Kingfisher, so she held Ilse back with a hand on her shoulder. *It is better this way*, Margarete thought. She was Ilse's sister and she wanted to take care of her. It was also her duty to keep her safe and make sure she didn't forget about being Jewish. But the longing on the little girl's face broke her heart and she thought suddenly that surely they could partake of what this strange, English family had to offer and still keep their growing bond and a sense of who they were?

'Margarete, Ilse!' Judith signalled to them again, holding out a bauble in each hand.

This time Ilse slipped from Margarete's grip and ran to the tree, so she felt compelled to follow.

Judith placed a glass ornament in each of their hands.

Margarete cradled the dark blue ball in her palm. 'Me?' she asked in German, as she pointed to herself. 'And Ilse?' She touched the red bauble Ilse held and motioned towards the tree.

Judith and Mrs Kingfisher both nodded and Judith skimmed the tree vaguely with her hands. Margarete took this to mean they could hang the decorations anywhere.

Ilse didn't waste any time in letting hers swing from a low branch. When she'd done that, Mrs Kingfisher helped her to another. Margarete took a bit more time choosing a vantage point for her ornament, but after she did she stepped back and felt a small smile twitch her lips. Judith pointed to all the boxes, then to each of them, letting them know they would trim the tree together. Somehow the room began to feel warmer and cosier after that.

As they were finishing, Mr Kingfisher called them to the kitchen, where he whipped a cloth off a chicken that looked as if it was ready to be put in the oven.

'Mmm.' Ilse rubbed her stomach. 'I like it,' she said in German. Margarete laughed and so did the Kingfishers, so Margarete guessed that everyone understood the mime, no matter the language.

'No oink, oink,' Judith said, beside herself with excitement. She crossed her arms over her chest and looked proudly from one of her parents to the other. Anyone would have thought she'd managed to halt the Nazis all by herself.

A lump rose in Margarete's throat. Maybe the Kingfishers usually had pork for their celebrations, but this year they were going to have chicken so that she and Ilse could eat with them. She could not believe it and she had to blink away her tears. She looked down at Ilse, who was unashamedly drooling from a wide smile. No matter what else happened, Margarete thought, she would never forget this moment. She looked at each of the Kingfishers in turn and whispered, 'Thank you.'

Tea that evening was a simple stew. Afterwards, the girls hung large, sock-shaped sacks above the fireplace, which Judith pretended to secretly fill — and then unpack — while making a surprised face. Perhaps they would find out more the next day. They had a bath and Mrs Kingfisher read

them a story that she and Ilse could not understand, but they liked the pictures and the soothing rhythm of the words.

In bed, Ilse stroked Kathe first on Margarete's cheek, then on her own. 'What will happen tomorrow?' the little girl asked. 'I hope it will be as fun as today.'

'I do not know,' Margarete said. 'But I hope so too.'

With that, Ilse put her thumb in her mouth and fell into a deep sleep.

Chapter 9

Sunday 25 December 1938

Ilse

Ilse could not understand how the large socks hanging from the mantelpiece had filled out overnight. She and Margarete stood and stared at the mysterious lumps and bumps and, although Ilse felt excited, she wondered what any of them had to do with her.

‘Who did this?’ she asked Margarete.

Margarete shrugged. ‘Maybe Saint Nicholas? Although it is very late for him . . . Or Mr and Mrs Kingfisher?’

They both turned to their foster parents, who were smiling broadly and sipping from glasses filled with the same sticky liquid they seemed to enjoy so much. They asked Judith a few questions that Ilse thought were about Daisy — she recognised the name — and when Judith answered, ‘Yes,’ to all of them, Mr and Mrs Kingfisher nodded.

With a squeak of excitement, Judith carefully took her stocking down and set it next to her on the floor. Mr Kingfisher coughed and blinked a couple of times before miming to the girls that they should do the same — he wasn’t as good at acting as Judith, which made his wife and daughter laugh out loud.

Everyone was very happy. Despite the rain lashing at the windows, the house was much warmer than usual for this time of morning, with a coal fire burning. Ilse’s gaze was drawn to the tree, which dazzled now that the lights were turned on, and to the colourful paper chains they’d made yesterday that swung from the ceiling.

Mr Kingfisher sipped from his glass and tried out his acting skills again. Ilse knew what he was miming, and she was sure Margarete did, too, but still neither girl moved towards their laden stocking. It didn’t seem possible that they could claim what was inside for themselves.

At last, Judith took down Margarete and Ilse’s stockings and handed them out. Then she went about digging her hands into the toe of hers and pulling out all manner of exciting things. Ilse could not believe her eyes at what appeared. A whole orange; colouring pencils; a mouth organ; a book; a puzzle, a bar of chocolate and a collar for Daisy. A look of surprise, like

the one she'd mimed yesterday, lit up Judith's face as she exclaimed over each new item. She called Daisy to her and replaced the dog's collar, then snuggled up with her. 'Ilse,' she said, pointing to the sock by Ilse's side.

Ilse felt her eyes bulge as, copying Judith, she plunged her hand into the sock. There were a number of things inside — some soft, others with hardened corners, large objects next to small things. None of the shapes were familiar to her touch.

She drew out a tin of paints, a paintbrush and a colouring book. Next there was a rubbery, striped ball, an orange, chocolate, hair ribbons for her growing plaits and then — the biggest surprise of all — a sock doll that looked exactly like Kathe except it was new and clean and expertly embroidered. Ilse picked up Kathe in one hand, the new doll in the other, and turned to Margarete. 'One Kathe. Two Kathes. Why?' she asked.

'I do not know.' Margarete sounded as baffled as Ilse.

Judith and Mrs Kingfisher talked together for a few moments, then Judith picked up Kathe and gave her to Mrs Kingfisher, who mimed washing, drying and mending her, then giving her back to Ilse. The new doll was then taken from Ilse and she went through the same routine.

'Oh.' Margarete seemed to understand and explained to Ilse that, with two dolls, she would never have to be without one while the other was being laundered. 'It is very clever, Ilse,' she said.

It sounded confusing, and for a moment Ilse thought she might have to scream again. 'Will she take Kathe from me?'

'Only for a little while so she can be fresh and clean, then she will give her back. Say thank you to Mrs Kingfisher.'

Ilse nodded. 'Thank you, Mrs Kingfisher,' she said, trying her best to say the words properly in English. She sniffed the new doll and rubbed her against her face to see if she smelled and felt the same. She wasn't too bad — there was more of her because Kathe had been worn threadbare in places, but if she scrunched her up and held her close she would soon share Kathe's comforting scent.

Then Margarete, who Ilse thought looked shy and awkward, was encouraged to delve into her own stocking. Out came the orange and chocolate, which she put in the middle of the floor to show she wanted to share them. After that, she produced a pair of sticks and a ball of wool, which she seemed to know what to do with because she clicked them

together and pretended to wind a scarf around her neck. The last thing she pulled out was an ornately engraved comb and brush set that she was mesmerised by. When she looked up, tears were in her eyes. Again Mrs Kingfisher said something to Judith, who mimed the instruction by pulling out strands of her hair, then crossing her arms and shaking her head.

Ilse thought it would be difficult for Margarete to leave her hair alone, almost as hard as if she'd been told not to suck her thumb or to abandon Kathe.

Judith hummed along to the wireless and opened the cover of her new book, which had a picture of a black horse on the front. She seemed very pleased with it. Mr Kingfisher filled up his and Mrs Kingfisher's glasses and Mrs Kingfisher dashed to the kitchen, holding up five fingers.

When she returned five minutes later, Mr Kingfisher handed his wife and his daughter a gift each, although he said that Judith's present was for all the girls to share. Mrs Kingfisher's gift, a twinkling brooch, made her give Mr Kingfisher a kiss. Ilse and Margarete watched with curiosity. Judith, meanwhile, hid her face in her elbow and made noises that sounded as if she might be sick. Then it was Judith's turn to unwrap her gift.

The package in Judith's hands was big and heavy — if the way she strained to hold it was anything to go by. When she took off the wrapping paper to reveal another book, her mouth formed a perfect circle and Mr Kingfisher was thanked again with a hug and a kiss on his cheek. Judith sat with him and looked through the pages for a few moments, until she pointed to the two girls and motioned for them to come to her.

They stood and looked at the tiny printing on the thin leaves of paper. Ilse didn't know what she was supposed to be looking at. But when Mr Kingfisher pointed to a few lines, Margarete nodded and smiled. 'It is a special book called a dictionary, Ilse,' she explained. 'We can look for a word in German and it will tell Judish what that same word is in English. And it can be used the other way around, too. It will help us to learn.'

'I can't read.' Ilse shrugged.

'You will learn when you go to school, Liebling,' Margarete said. 'Until then, Judish and I will help you.'

Margarete seemed sure about that, so Ilse didn't need to know any more. Mrs Kingfisher handed each of them a piece of pastry and said what sounded like 'a mint spy'. This must be what they'd smelled yesterday

because the spicy aroma was almost overpowering. Judith and Mr Kingfisher made all sorts of happy noises when they bit into theirs and, when Margarete and Ilse did the same, they looked at each other in astonishment. The sweet, buttery case crumbled in Ilse's mouth and small, plump fruits burst on her tongue. Ilse started to giggle as something juicy ran down her chin. It was even better than the hot chocolate they'd had on their journey to London and Ilse thought she could happily eat nothing else for the rest of her life.

As if everything they'd been given wasn't enough, they each had a new pair of white socks and a dress. Ilse's was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. It was pale pink and a row of rosebuds had been sewn around the hem and neck. She hardly dared touch it, but when she did it felt as silky as water in her hand. Judith's was a mixture of checked colours and Margarete's was a shiny navy blue that looked very grown up.

Then Mr Kingfisher stood, clapped his hands and ushered the girls upstairs. Judith mimed getting ready to leave the house and Ilse had butterflies thinking about walking outside in her new clothes. They gathered by the front door, hurriedly put on their hats and coats and sheltered under umbrellas as they headed down the road in the rain.

A lot of other people were walking in the same direction. They said things that sounded nice to each other and Ilse felt happy. Both Kathes were snug in her pocket and every time her coat parted she caught a glimpse of her new dress. Margarete looked lovely in her blue outfit and her new hairbrush had made the twists of her plaited hair shine. As always, Ilse held on tightly to her older sister's hand.

Then, without any warning, Margarete brought both of them to an abrupt halt outside the building that they, and all the people on the street, were walking towards. 'No,' Margarete said, shaking her head. She pulled on Ilse's hand as the Kingfishers marched ahead.

'Margarete,' Judith called.

But Margarete shook her head and refused to budge.

When Mr and Mrs Kingfisher turned, Mr Kingfisher looked at his watch and Mrs Kingfisher's nostrils flared, which didn't make her look as pretty as she had done earlier.

They beckoned impatiently but Margarete pointed to a cross on top of a pointed tower and shook her head again.

The Kingfishers had a heated discussion, which made a lot of people stare, and unhappy scenes from Berlin popped into Ilse's mind. Margarete tried a few times to make their foster family understand that she and Ilse couldn't go into the church as they were Jüdisch. But Ilse felt a pang of regret. She thought it would be lovely to see inside the lit building with stained-glass windows and beautiful music flowing from its doors.

Judith looked close to tears as she tried to mime what her parents wanted Margarete and Ilse to do, but Ilse was sure Margarete knew already and wasn't about to let the plan unfold. Then Judith pointed to the church and said something about Christmas. Next, she pretended to go to sleep and wake up the next day with crossed arms, which they knew by now to mean the same thing wouldn't be happening again the following day.

'Judish is telling us this is only for today.' Margarete's voice was thick with upset, which made Ilse feel sad. 'I do not know what to do,' she added. 'To go in or refuse and stay outside? Either way, it's not right.'

Ilse shivered from the cold. Mr Kingfisher pulled on his wife's arm and Margarete looked longingly at a nearby bench, but the thought of sitting on the damp wood in her new dress made Ilse feel desperate.

'Pleeease,' Judith begged, putting her hands together in the same shape as the tower on the church.

'We will go this once,' Margarete said to Ilse. 'But never again.'

Ilse felt relief course through her as all three girls followed behind Mr and Mrs Kingfisher. Then she thought Mrs Kingfisher mumbled something like, 'Ungrate . . .' in Margarete's direction before she ushered the girls through the narrow stone doorway and into a long pew.

For an hour they stood up, then sat back down. People talked and people sang. Margarete did not let Ilse's hand drop, even when sweat made their palms slick, until they left the church.

When they arrived home, they ate a huge feast while wearing paper crowns. This was followed by a big pudding that tasted like the little pie they'd eaten earlier. The girls started on the puzzle and Judith tried out the big book of words. Mr and Mrs Kingfisher drank some more amber liquid and Ilse was on Margarete's side when they played a game called ludo.

It was very nice, but different from the first half of the day — no one was as jolly as they had been earlier. It had all seemed to change after the outing to church.

Chapter 10

Sunday 8 January 1939

Ilse

Ilse liked the swing in the garden. It was attached to the branch of a huge tree that made eerie noises when it was pushed, especially if they were playing outside just as it was getting dark.

Swing. Judith had taught her that word. She touched everything around them, looked in the big book Mr Kingfisher had given all three of them for Christmas, said the names in a funny kind of German — which made Ilse giggle — and then in English. *Plate, chair, pavement, wall, spoon, book, fireplace, tree.* If either Ilse or Margarete didn't attempt the English, Judith shook her head and wagged her finger until they did. That gesture reminded Ilse of one of the Frauleins who'd taken care of the children at the orphanage. Sometimes the young woman's shoulder-length hair and red lipstick flashed through her mind, but it was getting harder every day to conjure up her image.

There were a lot of things Margarete mentioned that Ilse couldn't remember very well and, when that happened, her older sister became sad and quiet. She couldn't recall the synagogue, or the rabbi who came along to say prayers and give his blessing. The other children she'd lived with were blurring into one — a lopsided grin and a scabby knee that probably hadn't belonged to the same child or the wrong pair of plaits on the wrong head. Except for her friend, Renate. When she closed her eyes, she could still picture her quite plainly, and she wondered where she was and what she was doing.

One night, Margarete whispered to her, 'Do you remember Kristallnacht?'

Ilse wound her fingers around Margarete's hand and said she didn't think so.

'No?' Margarete pushed. 'When all the windows were broken and the ground was a carpet of glass in the morning? It was everyone against the Jews and their belongings. In my orphanage, we hid under the beds. Where did you hide?'

Ilse thought hard. She got the feeling she was a disappointment to Margarete when she couldn't remember certain things and that made an ache start in the pit of her stomach, so she tried her best to recall that night. Often, she and Renate would play under their beds. They would gather all the sock dolls they could find and make them act out preparing food with a mutti or helping with the washing and hanging it on the line. But those were fun, happy days. Kristallnacht sounded like a horrible, upsetting time. She wondered if it was the night she'd been shoved into an understairs cupboard with a lot of other children and ordered to stay quiet and still. There had been a lot of shouting in the distance and sudden loud bangs. Her heart had thumped in her chest and, when she held Renate's hand, she could feel a tic jumping about in her friend's wrist. Footsteps ran up and down the stairs and her tongue had been so dry it stuck to the roof of her mouth. Not being able to see what was going on outside was awful, and yet she couldn't bear the thought of watching the dreadful things that must have been happening. The small space was airless and an old stool dug so hard into her back she thought she might cry out. But the worst thing was not knowing if anyone would come back for them. Every time that thought came, she tried to push it away quickly. But sometimes it was too late and tiny darts of panic jabbed at her. A chill ran through her when she imagined not being able to open the door from the inside or finally freeing themselves and finding all the grown-ups gone. They would be on their own then and unable to look after themselves. Or worse than that, people they didn't know might come to hurt them and leave them hungry — some of the soldiers who strutted around the streets or one of the women who spat on them when they walked past.

When at last their Fraulein had come and ushered them out, relief had made her feel weak. But things didn't go back to how they'd been before that strange night and, when that big man had picked her up and taken her to the train, she'd felt that same prickly fear all over again. Until Margarete claimed her and said she was the sister she'd never known she had.

But she wished Margarete wouldn't keep talking about Kristallnacht. If it was the same night she thought it was, it made her feel afraid and alone all over again.

'Now we must go to sleep, Liebling,' Margarete whispered. 'You know we have school in the morning.'

Too many thoughts crowded Ilse's head: images of holding Renate's hand in the cupboard mixed up with Judith pointing to the swing with Daisy sitting on the wooden seat — which would be such a silly thing for a dog to do. Books and pencils floated across her mind because she'd been told they would be waiting for her at school. It was too much, and she couldn't make sense of it, so instead of trying she found her thumb, made sure Kathe was safe and blocked out everything else.

* * *

It was so cold in the morning that delicately patterned ice had formed on the inside of the bedroom window overnight. Ilse traced the markings with her finger until they started to melt. Freezing fog hung in the air and wrapped its long, trailing fingers around fences and trees.

They dressed quickly and waited until Judith and Daisy came for them. 'Are you excited?' Judith asked, making butterfly movements over her stomach.

Ilse did feel as though insects were buzzing around inside her, but Margarete looked more worried than eager, so she curbed her enthusiasm.

'Mum,' Judith carried on, 'That is, Mrs Kingfisher, will walk with us today and make sure you're both okay.' She used the walking mime again. 'Then tomorrow we're on our own.'

Ilse only understood the words Mum, Mrs Kingfisher and okay. But she wanted to know what the word was for the icy patterns on the window and repeated the word, 'frost' after Judith.

That was exactly the same as the very nice woman who helped Mrs Kingfisher and gave them biscuits or a toffee when no one was looking. When Ilse thought of her she felt warm inside, not cold and shivery like the icy etching on the window.

A lot of children in grey uniforms were making their way along the road in the same direction. Some mums walked with them, but most were on their own, so Ilse wondered if that was what started the stares. Mrs Kingfisher looked straight ahead and ignored everyone, and Ilse wished she could do the same. But the sneering faces she'd seen in Berlin gathered like storm clouds, and the familiar feeling of wanting to get home quickly from the park or from a walk ran through her. Margarete said they had come to this place to be safe and happy, but she rarely felt either.

When Mrs Kingfisher let go of her hand for a moment to readjust her bag or hat, Ilse patted the pocket where Kathe was snuggled. Judith's steps were light and breezy and there were even a couple of times when she skipped along. But Ilse and Margarete's feet sounded heavy on the pavement, as if something inside their stiff, new shoes was weighing them down.

At the school gates, the crowd of children filtered through to the playground in twos and threes. There they began to call out to each other and jump around and play tag. Ilse watched on, transfixed. She could clearly remember playing like that at her orphanage and looked to see if there was any recognition on Margarete's face, but her older sister gave nothing away except that familiar look of unease.

They walked into a quiet office, where a man sat behind a desk. Strands of grey hair spread across his mottled head, and behind him pictures and certificates covered the wall. He shook Mrs Kingfisher's hand and said, 'Willkommen,' to each of the girls, although in a rather funny accent.

Ilse felt overjoyed and she tugged on Margarete's hand. It was so exciting. Here was a grown-up they could speak with in German, and Margarete must have thought the same thing, because she immediately started to babble away. 'My sister must be in the same class as me, if you please. We cannot be separated, at least for a few days. And also, we are not allowed by our religion to eat pork. I am very sorry if it is a nuisance. But we are happy to be here, yes, Ilse?'

Ilse nodded. 'Yes,' she said.

'And we are very grateful,' Margarete concluded and waited for the man's reply.

But all he said was something about English.

'No German,' Judith said, crossing her arms and shaking her head.

Ilse thought she might cry. It would have been lovely to talk to someone without having to look to Judith to see if she could act it out.

As if that wasn't enough of a let-down, the man said something to Judith that caused her to kiss Mrs Kingfisher goodbye, give both girls a hug and leave the office. At the door she turned, touched her eyes, pointed at Ilse and Margarete and mimed skipping rope, so Ilse supposed she meant to say she would play with them later. Then two women came into the office.

One pointed to herself and said, 'Miss Edgars,' and the other said, 'Miss Jones.' Both their smiles were wide and friendly.

Miss Edgars took Margarete's hand and led her through the door and Miss Jones gently grabbed Ilse. It all felt okay, if a bit awkward and unnerving. But then Miss Edgars turned left down the corridor and Miss Jones to the right. Ilse could not understand or believe what was happening. That awful feeling she had when she was put in the cupboard swept over her again. And those other times: when the big man took her to the train to leave her there; when Margarete, her newfound sister, was being torn from her arms at the station; and when Mrs Kingfisher grabbed Kathe out of her hands.

Fear, like tiny stabbing darts, attacked her arms and legs and she could feel her face about to reach boiling point. There was nothing else for it.

She opened her mouth and screeched as loudly as she possibly could. It seemed to be the only way she could make herself heard.

Chapter 11

Monday 9 January 1939

Margarete

Doors flew open all along the corridor and teachers rushed to see what was causing the horrendous noise. From the looks on their faces, they must have thought Ilse was being tortured to within an inch of her life. Behind them, children clambered over each other to press their faces against the inside windows of their classrooms to take in the improbable sight.

Margarete was distraught; she twisted her wrist backwards and forwards in Miss Edgars' palm, but the young teacher said something incomprehensible and tightened her grip.

'But my sister,' Margarete said. Even as she uttered the words, she knew she wouldn't be understood. It was hopeless. She squirmed around and glimpsed Ilse, the heels of her new shoes desperately searching for a foothold on the dark, polished floor. Her face was so red it looked as if it were being roasted. Miss Jones was holding on to both of her arms and poor Kathe was teetering precariously close to the edge of Ilse's pocket.

'If we stay together . . .' Margarete began. 'Just for today. Tomorrow we will be better able to . . .'

But all Miss Edgars did was drop her smile and shake her head. They stopped at one of the doors and, when Miss Edgars pushed it open, they were faced with what looked like all the children in England staring at them. A feeling of dread raced through Margarete. The stuffy room smelled of old books and dirty hair. Heat prickled under her arms and her new woollen school blazer scratched at her neck.

If not for the escalating screams from Ilse — that she was sure signalled the little girl meeting the same scene when she walked into her own classroom — she would have made a bolt for it. She could crawl under those desks there, around the chalkboard at the side, double back on herself through Miss Edgars' legs, squirm through the door and find her way to the back streets of Woking.

Miss Edgars said something to the class. The only word Margarete recognised was, 'children', but she guessed the teacher must have been telling them to sit down because as one, that was what they did. The girl

nearest to her had freckles across her nose. Two tufts of hair stood to attention on the head of a boy to her left. Another one pulled down his saggy grey sock and picked a scab on his leg. They didn't take their eyes off Margarete and it flashed through her mind that they looked more like a pack of wild animals than a group of children.

Miss Edgars shut the door and muffled Ilse's sobs and shrieks, although each of the muted screams still sliced through Margarete like a knife. 'My sister needs me,' she tried once more.

But of course the teacher didn't understand, so she ignored the plea. She beckoned for Margarete to follow her through the rows of children whose eyes bored into her and gestured for her to sit at a desk right at the front. Her legs were shaking, and she was sure she wouldn't be able to suppress her tears for a moment longer, never mind that she needed to use the toilet and had no idea where it was or how to ask for it. Judith had taught her and Ilse the question but she couldn't remember the order of the words. Was it, 'I need please lava the use?' or 'The lav need please?' And if she couldn't remember, how would Ilse? She felt as though she was about to collapse or explode. Miss Edgars said something, picked up a piece of chalk and wrote Margarete's name on the blackboard while announcing it out loud to the class. Then she rubbed it out and wrote up some sums in its place.

Stars flashed in front of Margarete's eyes. Miss Edgars opened a copybook for her, placed a pencil in her trembling hand and pointed to the problems she'd written out. Margarete was good at arithmetic, but she knew she wouldn't be able to fathom how to stop herself from shaking long enough to hold her pencil — let alone tackle the sums. Then just as she thought she wouldn't be able to take one more breath, the door opened. Ilse's shrieks from down the hall filled every corner of the classroom again and the headmaster beckoned for her to follow him.

Confusion washed over her. All she wanted was to be back in the orphanage in Berlin before the windows had been broken and this whole nightmare had begun. She wondered what she had done wrong, but she didn't care. So what if she was blamed for something that hadn't been her fault? It seemed that all the Jews in Germany were being blamed for everything or anything that wasn't right, when they had no idea what it was they were supposed to have done. She tugged a strand of hair from her

plaits and wound it around her finger. At the first possible chance she would dart away from the headmaster's line of sight, find Ilse, and then together they would . . . Ilse's wails were pitiful, but Margarete could not wait a moment longer. 'Lav,' she suddenly blurted out. 'Please.'

The headmaster opened a door along the corridor and Margarete rushed into a cubicle. For a couple of moments, the comforting relief of emptying her bladder consoled her, but when she joined the headmaster again the uproar from Ilse was just as deafening.

Beckoning her to follow him into his office the headmaster stood back, and there was Ilse, looking tiny on a huge chair, clutching a soggy Kathe in her arms. Ilse immediately cried out, 'Meine Schwester,' and the two girls flung themselves at each other.

Margarete's head was spinning as she spoke softly to Ilse. 'You must not cry anymore, Liebling,' she whispered. 'If you do, they might put one of us in a completely different school. That would be much worse, wouldn't it?'

Ilse looked at her, fear in her puffy, pink-rimmed eyes. 'But I want to be with you.'

'We have been through all of this. I thought you understood that they will not let us stay together. I am older than you and I have to be in a different class.'

Tears flooded Ilse's eyes again and when her face began to turn puce, Margarete shushed her and the little girl was able to mute her caterwauling — for now.

'I thought I would never see you ever again.' Ilse shivered as she spoke.

'We are safe here,' Margarete said, the words sticking in her throat because sometimes she wasn't quite sure if that was true. 'Remember I told you that?'

Ilse nodded her head. 'Yes, but then they took me away from you.' She laced her fingers together and then violently yanked them apart.

'I think,' Margarete said, 'that I will see you at the end of the day when school has finished.' She choked on a sob. That seemed like such a long time to her, so it must be interminable to Ilse. If only she could ask the headmaster to allow them to see each other at break times — that would

surely be allowed — but she hadn't an inkling how to start those words. Then she remembered Judith and the book.

‘Please,’ she faltered. ‘Judish.’

‘Ah,’ the headmaster said. Then he mumbled something about them being Jewish. ‘There’s nothing to be done about that, I’m afraid. The whole pork thing is a bit inconvenient, but . . .’

She only understood the word Jewish, but she didn’t give up. She shook her head, pointed to herself and Ilse, said their names, then repeated, ‘Judish.’

‘Ah, you want Judith Kingfisher?’

The headmaster understood Margarete; she understood him. Margarete felt as though the entire world was opening up around her. She nodded as hard and fast as she could.

They didn’t have to wait long for someone to fetch Judith. When she joined them, a deep frown puckered her brow and she quickly sat in a chair on the other side of Ilse. Margarete wondered if she thought she was going to be blamed for something, too.

Judith clasped and unclasped her hands in her lap while she and the headmaster had a conversation that sounded like rapid gunfire.

It was all so confusing and tiring, but when there was a lull Margarete took the opportunity to nudge Judith and mime opening a book.

‘Oh, I see.’ The headmaster brightened a bit. He took down a storybook from a shelf and went to hand it to Margarete, who almost cried out with frustration. She did not want to read to herself or Ilse, if that was what the headmaster thought. Besides, how could the silly man think a story written in English would solve their problems?

Now at the end of her tether, Margarete continued the performance by turning the pages of an imaginary book, then miming all of them speaking to each other. Judith didn’t seem to understand, which made Margarete’s heart falter. She felt defeated and didn’t know where to go from there.

Then Judith jumped up and grinned. ‘The book.’ She turned to the headmaster triumphantly.

Margarete had no idea what else was said, but Judith looked happy and she thought that was a good sign. They exchanged a few more words before the headmaster stood, opened the door and signalled that all three girls should go back to their classrooms.

‘No.’ Judith shook her head and stood her ground. She said something in a small, very polite voice and gently pushed the girls together.

Margarete knew better than to think everything would magically work out in her and Ilse’s favour, but she couldn’t help feeling optimistic. She didn’t take her eyes off the headmaster while he was making up his mind. He gazed down at Ilse and winced as he massaged his ears, Ilse’s screams no doubt reverberating in them.

The only word of his proclamation that Margarete recognised was, ‘yes’, and she felt as though a terrible burden had been lifted from her. There was the rest of the day to get through, the thought of which filled her with deep fatigue. But at least she and Ilse would be together. She held tightly to Ilse’s hand and Ilse held tightly to Margarete and Kathe, and then Margarete reached over to give Judith’s arm a brief but grateful squeeze.

Chapter 12

Monday 9 January 1939

Judith

Poor Margarete and Ilse. My heart goes out to them — as Mrs Frost says. I thought the first day of school might be hard, but I never for a moment dreamed it would be quite so disastrous.

I thought I'd prepared them. I taught them how to ask for the toilet; how to say please and thank you; I have finished my food; I have hurt myself; but I don't think they remembered any of it. And nobody at school today will recall anything except Ilse's screaming. At first, my classmates thought it was funny, then I could see their faces change when it went on and on and became terribly distressing. I asked Miss Battleaxe — I mustn't let Mum find out I call her that — if I could please be allowed to go and help my foster sisters to settle in, but she gave me one of her hard stares over the top of her spectacles and said, 'Don't ask ridiculous questions, Miss Kingfisher.'

Eventually, when the whole school was beyond distracted, the headmaster himself called on me for assistance. I don't know how I didn't snub my nose at Miss Battleaxe as I left for his office.

And much to my surprise — and probably everyone else's — I did help. I sorted the whole thing out. The girls got to stay together today and tomorrow I'm letting the teachers use the dictionary, which should make things much better. Except, a couple of incidents keep nagging at me and I don't know what to do about them.

There was nothing but pork for dinner. When I met Margarete and Ilse by the gate after school, I mimed eating and raised my hands in a questioning gesture.

Margarete mimed digging and peeling vegetables, so I suppose all they had to eat was a plate of watery cabbage and boiled potatoes.

'Cabbage and potatoes,' I said. 'Please say the words in English.'

Very wearily, Margarete repeated what I'd said.

'Did you like it, Ilse?' I asked, patting my stomach and licking my lips. She shook her head.

I would have to tell Mum and hope that she could get the headmaster to sort it out. Or Dad: he seemed to know a bit about why Jewish people don't eat pork. But he would probably only blink and turn the problem over to Mum.

The girls looked dishevelled and their uniforms were no longer crisp and neat. But it was more than that; I could feel the sadness and fear that clung to them. I smiled as I pointed to a shop and rattled off the names of everything in the window, but neither of them was impressed and I soon lost interest, too.

Perhaps the same thing was playing on their minds as was weighing on mine. My class was going out for dinner break as theirs was coming in, so I only had a moment to catch a glimpse of the children surrounding them in the playground. Or at least, I think they were, and I think I saw them. But nobody wants to be a tell-tale. Maybe the other children were simply curious rather than mean or nosy. I would be in their situation. I heard one girl say, 'Why didn't you eat your dinner?' And a lad who's known for not being nice shouted, 'What's the point of that sock?' as he pretended to pluck at Kathe with his grimy fingers. Another asked, in an unfriendly voice, why they couldn't speak English. But perhaps they just wanted to know and that was all. At least, I hope that was all.

When we got home Mum asked how our day had been, but before I had a chance to fill her in she shooed us upstairs to change out of our uniforms. As soon as that was done, Margarete asked for the dictionary. She mumbled a word, then looked at me and made a huge effort to say, 'Tomorrow.'

I shrugged and took the dictionary from her. 'I don't know about tomorrow,' I translated.

'Margarete and Ilse,' she said, clapping her hands together hard, as if there were a magnet attached to each palm.

I shrugged again.

For a moment, she looked as if she'd been beaten down and couldn't put up with one more thing. A resigned look came over her face and all at once she lay down on top of the bed and turned away from me and Ilse. I put my arm around her shoulders and Ilse nestled next to her and patted her head with Kathe. 'Meine Schwester,' she said, followed by something that probably amounted to 'please don't be upset'.

'Your tea is ready, girls,' Mum called up the stairs.

I ran down first and tried to tell Mum there were some things she would have to put right at the school, but there was a knock at the door, which took her attention away from me. I felt impatient and frustrated, as if steam was about to come out of my ears. Given the circumstances, it wouldn't have been at all surprising if it had. Perhaps it was Mrs Clarke come for a cup of tea or a sherry. If that was the case, I wouldn't get a chance to tell Mum anything until bedtime at the earliest. I shouted up the stairs and Margarete and Ilse came down, hand in hand. Remembering the way Margarete had pressed my arm earlier, I reached to do the same to her, but she gave me the cold shoulder.

There was cheese on toast and a Bakewell tart waiting for us. Ilse tucked in without holding back and said, 'I like it.' But instead of laughing at her this time, Margarete and I moved our food from one side of our plates to the other. It appeared that neither of us had much of an appetite.

Then, much to my astonishment, Mum came into the dining room with a lady who definitely wasn't Mrs Clarke. She was older, plumper, less well-dressed, but much more smiley than our neighbour.

'This is Mrs Shulman,' Mum sounded formal. 'Judith,' she added. 'Do sit up straight. Slouching isn't very ladylike.'

'Hello, girls.' Mrs Shulman beamed at us.

'She is from the Association of Jewish Refugees, which keeps an eye on the Kindertransport children, and she would like to have a chat with Margarete and Ilse.'

Mrs Shulman nodded, then spoke in German, so all I could understand were my foster sisters' names. Like before, I felt as if I had been struck by a bolt of lightning when faced with what Margarete and Ilse had to put up with all the time.

Then to my astonishment, Margarete burst into tears. She put her face in her hands and cried, her shoulders hiccoughing up and down. Then she abandoned the table and threw her arms around Mrs Shulman, saying something that sounded like, 'Deutsch,' many times over. I think Ilse was overwhelmed, but she followed her sister's lead, taking Kathe with her.

Mum's eyes were wide and her mouth was agape. She gave me a look that told me I'd better stay on my chair. But if this woman could help sort out the problems at school for Margarete and Ilse, I wanted to add my penny's worth to the conversation.

Chapter 13

Monday 9 January 1939

Margarete

Whenever Margarete had imagined an angel, she had not looked anything like the stout, grey-haired Mrs Shulman. But she knew that was how she would think of those otherworldly creatures from now on.

The older woman didn't seem in the least embarrassed to have a twelve-year-old girl clinging to her soft middle. All she did was smooth Margarete's hair and smile beatifically. 'It's all right, Liebling,' she said in perfect German. 'This can't be easy for you. Or anyone,' she added, giving Ilse a hug, too.

For Margarete, it was wonderful to hear words she could understand without having to resort to a book or a mime. They sounded as lilting as a flute or harp and she didn't ever want the music to stop.

The wonderful woman translated when Mrs Kingfisher said, 'I am going to give Mrs Shulman a tour of the house while you girls sit and finish your lovely tea. Then we'll all retire to the sitting room for our chat.' Margarete sat obediently, cut a square of her now-cold cheese on toast and marvelled at how easily Mrs Shulman slipped between one language and the other. She thought she'd like to be that clever one day, but knew that was a long way in the future.

'Deutsch,' she said to Ilse and once again to Judith. It was difficult to eat and drink around a huge smile, but she couldn't stop her face from betraying her happiness. Her legs pumped back and forth under her chair even though Mr Kingfisher forbade it and she listed, in German — which was also against mealtime rules — all the things she and Ilse needed to speak to Mrs Shulman about.

Margarete crammed the bread and tea into her mouth and encouraged Ilse to do the same. She didn't think they should keep Mrs Shulman waiting when she wanted to see them. Every tick from the clock seemed like an hour instead of a minute and Margarete had to stop herself from worrying at her hair. Perhaps Mrs Kingfisher had told Mrs Shulman that the girls were so happy and settled that there was no need to speak to them and she'd left, taking all of Margarete's hopes for help and understanding with her. Or

perhaps she'd found out that Ilse had almost screamed down the school and she was talking to Mrs Kingfisher about the best way to punish the girls. Then the worst thought imaginable engulfed her. What if she had found out that the two girls were not real sisters and the only reason everyone thought they were was because Margarete had told a terrible lie? It felt as if her heart dropped into her toes, then fought its way back up to her chest, where it hammered much harder than it should have done.

Margarete thought she must have paled, because Ilse tipped her head to one side and asked, 'Are you poorly?' Then she frowned and placed her little hand on Margarete's forehead as if checking for a fever, which made Judith laugh, and the worries Margarete had diminished a tiny bit.

At last the two women came back, and the three girls followed them to the sitting room, Daisy close behind. The curtains were closed, a fire had been built and a decanter of sherry and two tiny glasses were laid out on a table. Mrs Shulman held a pen and notebook in her hands and addressed questions in German to Margarete and Ilse, who sat side by side next to Judith on the sofa. She started off by asking funny things like, 'How is Kathe getting on here in England, Ilse?'

Ilse giggled and held the threadbare sock to her ear as if she was listening to a secret. 'She likes some things but doesn't like some things.'

'Oh, I see,' Mrs Shulman said. 'I wonder what she does like. Can she tell me?'

'The yummy food, but Margarete doesn't let her eat the oink oink,' Ilse said.

Margarete felt her face colour. 'That is the only thing you cannot have,' she defended herself. 'You know we are not allowed to eat that, Ilse.' She reached out for the little girl's hand.

Mrs Kingfisher sat, her glass of sherry abandoned on the table in front of her, a look of utter dismay on her face. Of course, she didn't have a clue what was being said and Margarete recognised the signs of feeling like a complete outsider in the way she shrank into the back of her chair, wrung her hands on her lap and looked down at the floor. Margarete felt both sympathy and triumph that the woman who seemed to be somewhat unaware or dismissive of their plight was now in the same position — if only for an hour or so — that they lived in permanently.

‘I am not allowed to eat pork either,’ Mrs Shulman said, ‘so I know how difficult it can be. However, are you aware that there are circumstances in which you can eat it?’

Margarete shook her head and Ilse followed her lead.

Mrs Shulman leaned forward and spoke to the girls in a very kindly tone of voice. ‘If there is nothing else.’ She paused and let that sink in. ‘So, if you are at school or here or out for dinner and you are only offered pork you have leave to eat it.’

Margarete crossed her hands over her chest in an X and tightly closed her mouth.

‘The rabbi would tell you the same thing.’ Mrs Shulman looked very serious. ‘You are growing and you must not go hungry. So, look at me.’ She waited until both Margarete and Ilse were concentrating on her. ‘You have permission should the need arise. Do you understand?’

Margarete nodded reluctantly, but Ilse patted her stomach and looked more enthusiastic.

Mrs Shulman turned and reeled off a rather long speech in English to Mrs Kingfisher and Judith, who looked at each other and raised their eyebrows. ‘Mrs Kingfisher,’ she addressed Margarete and Ilse again, ‘says she has been doing her best not to give you pork. Isn’t that kind of her? But she might have to on occasions and she is glad to know that won’t be too much of a problem.’

‘Thank you,’ Margarete said in faltering English. Perhaps Mrs Kingfisher wasn’t so detached after all.

‘It might not be easy for the school to cook something completely different for you when they have pork. That’s a perfect example of eating what is put in front of you.’

There was a rustle at the door and Mr Kingfisher stuck his head in and stared at them. ‘I beg your pardon.’ He blinked several times behind his glasses.

‘Henry.’ Mrs Kingfisher stood up quickly. ‘Let me introduce you to Mrs Shulman, from the Association of Jewish Refugees. She’s come round to check on Margarete and Ilse’s welfare. I think it would be a good idea if you were to join us.’

Mr Kingfisher, having no choice in the matter, poured himself a finger of sherry and sat in a chair near the fire, a resigned look on his face.

Mrs Shulman asked about their bedroom, saying it looked lovely and comfy; about how they were getting on with Judith; if they liked playing with Daisy and taking it in turns on the swing; and if they wanted her to arrange for them to attend the synagogue.

That was a hard one. Margarete thought she would rather have a grown-up decide on the answer. Mrs Shulman had translated the question into English and all three Kingfishers waited nervously for her answer. She looked down at Ilse, who was playing with Kathe as if she didn't have a care in the world. She thought about how her foster family enjoyed Saturdays — walking in the park or reading or going to the cinema — and how much that would change if they had to take Margarete and Ilse to the synagogue. She remembered the scene when she didn't want her and Ilse to go to the church service on Christmas morning. Would asking the Kingfishers to give up their Saturdays cause the same resentment and anger? 'I think it will be okay if we do not go every week,' Margarete said. 'We have enough to learn with English and school. But if possible, perhaps we could go for some special days? Hanukkah or Yom Kippur? Maybe Passover? If someone tells me the way to the synagogue, Ilse and I can walk there and back ourselves.'

Mr Kingfisher spoke up for the first time. 'There is no synagogue in Woking that I'm aware of,' he said.

'But we could make enquiries about the nearest one,' Mrs Kingfisher said. 'And I'm sure we could come to some arrangement about how the girls could get there.'

Mrs Shulman again translated and Margarete nodded her head and said thank you.

The clock chimed seven and Mrs Shulman shuffled about on her chair as if she were getting ready to leave, but Judith put up her hand. Mrs Shulman turned to her with an encouraging smile and then it seemed as if their foster sister couldn't get her words out, which was an unheard-of event. She looked uncomfortable and faltered a couple of times before she found her stride. The smile on Mrs Shulman's face drooped as she listened intently.

Mrs Kingfisher asked Judith a couple of questions, but all Judith did in reply was shake her head and shrug her shoulders.

Then Mrs Shulman turned to Margarete and Ilse and asked if there had been any unpleasantness with the children in school that day. Margarete narrowed her eyes and shot Judith an accusatory look.

‘I had to tell, Margarete,’ Judith said through Mrs Shulman.

‘There was nothing to tell,’ Margarete was quick to answer. ‘We did not even talk about it.’

‘How can we talk about it when we don’t speak each other’s language?’ Judith’s voice was hoarse.

Mr and Mrs Kingfisher craned their necks to follow and ended up looking as if they were watching a tennis match, but Mrs Shulman took the volley of translations in her stride.

‘We have the book,’ Margarete said.

‘There’s hardly been a minute to look at the book since we’ve been home. It took you a quarter of an hour to say the word tomorrow. Oh, Mrs Shulman, Margarete wants to know whether she and Ilse are going to be separated tomorrow at school,’ she said sulkily.

‘Let’s take one thing at a time, shall we . . . ?’

‘Kathe doesn’t like the playground,’ Ilse said. ‘And I don’t either.’ She cuddled the little doll close.

Mrs Kingfisher poured herself another sherry and Mr Kingfisher signalled for the bottle to be passed to him.

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ Mrs Shulman said. ‘Why don’t you like the playground, Ilse?’

Ilse looked to each of the grown-ups as if considering her answer. ‘They do this.’ She pulled Margarete and Judith up with her and stood them close together. Then she re-enacted the children crowding in on them and firing questions one after another. In the process, she linked the older girls’ hands together, and that seemed to soften the tension between them.

‘Why didn’t you tell me that, Margarete?’ Mrs Shulman asked.

‘Or me?’ Mrs Kingfisher said.

‘It was nothing.’ Margarete looked down at the floor. ‘I will make sure Ilse is safe until they get used to us and leave us alone.’

Mrs Shulman made a note in her book and asked Mrs Kingfisher to speak to the headmaster the next day.

‘No, please do not do that.’ Margarete’s voice was tense with desperation. ‘It will make things worse.’

‘I’m afraid it is something that must be done,’ Mrs Shulman said. ‘And I’m sure it will help.’

But Margarete shook her head. She knew from experience that it wouldn’t. But how could she tell them that? When anyone had spoken up against the taunts and slurs in Berlin, the situation hadn’t improved at all. Those people disappeared and she’d heard the whispering grown-ups say they had been taken to concentration camps where they were tortured and killed for being Jewish. Perhaps their religion was not what bothered the children in the playground, but they definitely didn’t like the fact that the girls didn’t eat pork and spoke German. She and Ilse would have to learn to fit in on the outside, even if they railed against some things on the inside. Now they had been given permission to eat that vile meat — if they could stomach it — she knew they would have to learn English as fast as they possibly could. Until then it would be best if they could make themselves as small and unintrusive as they possibly could.

Margarete knew she wouldn’t be able to change the grown-ups’ minds about meeting with the headmaster, so she decided to move on to something she might be able to improve. ‘Thank you for reminding me to ask about tomorrow, Jewish,’ Margarete said. ‘I know that Ilse and I cannot be together in the same classroom at school, but can we please meet up every dinner and break time for a while, until Ilse is more settled? If we can, I am sure Ilse will promise not to scream and shout again.’ She turned to Ilse. ‘Yes, Little One?’

At first Ilse seemed unsure, but Margarete told her it was the best they could hope for.

Eventually, after a chat with Kathe, Ilse brightened up. ‘I think it will be okay,’ she said. ‘And I will try hard not to cry at school again.’

There was a collective sigh from everyone in the room. When Mrs Kingfisher said she would add that to her list of points to talk to the headmaster about, Mrs Shulman got up to leave and Margarete felt the familiar lump gathering in her throat.

‘You are doing so well, Lieblings,’ Mrs Shulman said. ‘You are a credit to your orphanages, to Mr and Mrs Kingfisher and to Germany.’

That statement made small hairs stand to attention on the back of Margarete’s neck. After everything that Germany had done to her and Ilse, why would she want that country to be proud of her now?

‘Oh, and the way in which you found each other on the train was nothing short of a miracle, wasn’t it? I am so happy for you.’

Margarete felt the guilt she’d pushed to the back of her mind creep up on her again. It was wrong to keep such a huge secret from all the people trying to help her but there was nothing she could do about it now. If she were to tell the truth, Ilse and she would be parted for good, and the guilt she would experience at that happening would surely outweigh anything she’d felt before.

‘Thank you, Mrs Shulman,’ Margarete said. ‘For helping me and Ilse.’

‘Bye bye,’ Ilse joined in, waving Kathe in her fist.

‘I will return in a few months and we can have another chat then,’ Mrs Shulman said as she smiled her way towards the door.

Margarete hoped that was true, but she remembered how many children there had been on the Kindertransport who needed a similar visit, and, while she couldn’t be sure, she wondered if she would ever see kind Mrs Shulman again — which meant it was all up to her from now on.

Chapter 14

Sunday 3 September 1939

Ilse

There had been singing, a birthday cake with candles, egg and cress sandwiches, a pretty pop-up card and a proper dolly for Ilse on the day she had turned five, which was the 16th of March — something she hadn't known or even thought about before.

The Fraulein at the orphanage had always warned them it was bad luck to say anything about a birthday until the actual day, but hers had been mentioned so many times during the week before that she began to feel alarmed. 'It is okay, Liebling,' Margarete had whispered. 'The English culture is different.'

'What do you mean?' Ilse asked.

Margarete sat down heavily on the bed, which made Ilse wonder if she asked her sister too many questions.

After thinking for a few minutes, Margarete tried to explain. 'Culture is the way people from a certain place do things. Except . . . not all the people. There are a lot of groups who do things a bit differently from each other, too.'

Ilse hoped Margarete could cope with one more question. 'What things?' she asked.

'Things like talking about a birthday or not talking about a birthday before it happens.' Even though she wasn't supposed to, she twiddled a string of loose hair around her finger, then released it again. 'Or the thing about the candles that Judish told me about. They put lit candles on a cake for the birthday person to blow out. So do not be surprised when there is not a Waldorf Ring. Did you have one of those in your orphanage?'

Ilse put her thumb in her mouth and held Kathe close. There had been a wooden ring with twelve holes for candles plus one in the middle for luck. All around the outside were little trays where others could put trinkets that reminded them of the person whose special day it was — a crisp orange leaf if they were born in the autumn or a pencil if they were good at colouring in. 'I liked it,' Ilse said, sadness in her voice. 'Maybe Mrs Kingfisher will find one for us.'

‘I do not think so,’ Margarete said. ‘She tries to be kind, but she would not think of it. Anyway, it is not only places,’ she carried on.

‘What isn’t?’ Ilse asked.

‘Different cultures.’

Ilse didn’t care much anymore, but she made an effort to listen carefully.

‘There are religions and clubs and classes of people. So, we are Jüdisch and Jüdisch people all over the world do a lot of things in the same way. At least I think they do. Now we must try to do things the way they are done here because we must learn to fit in and not draw attention to ourselves. Besides, the Kingfishers are going to make the day very special for you and I am sure you are going to have fun.’

So Ilse had done her best to fit in and she’d enjoyed the day very much. But today was Margarete’s birthday and all she got was a handmade card from Judith, Ilse and Daisy, and a treacle tart that Mrs Frost had made. She said thank you many times and smiled a lot, but Ilse felt bad for her. Instead of singing and playing silly games, everyone moped about as if something terrible had happened.

That night in bed, Ilse pressed her new doll towards Margarete. ‘I thought you might get a dolly of your own today,’ she said. ‘Would you like to have Renate to keep?’

‘That is very nice of you,’ Margarete said. ‘But no, thank you. If you give her to me then Mr and Mrs Kingfisher will think you are ungrateful and they might not like that. Remember I told you? We must not do anything to make others think badly of us. That is why you cannot call the dolly Renate, you must call her Rosie, as Mrs Kingfisher suggested.’

Ilse turned over onto her back and let Rosie drop to the floor. Everyone had beamed at her while she opened the wrapping paper around the gift, and they had all asked at once what she was going to name her new doll. ‘Renate,’ she’d said without a minute’s hesitation, fighting back the tears that could so easily have bewildered Mr and Mrs Kingfisher.

For some reason, Mrs Kingfisher’s smile slipped when she heard that name and she looked most displeased. ‘You’re in England now,’ she said, her voice a false-sounding singsong. ‘Let’s give her an English name, shall we?’

Mr Kingfisher went to speak up, but Mrs Kingfisher turned her gaze on him and he did nothing more than blink a couple of times. That was enough to make Judith, who looked as if she were about to say something too, keep her eyes on the floor and her mouth closed.

‘How about Rosie?’ Mrs Kingfisher said. ‘That’s a lovely British name. And it reminds me of you, Ilse. You are the image of a beautiful English rose.’

Ilse didn’t dislike the name Rosie, but she liked the name Renate more. Besides, the doll had been given to her and she thought that meant she could name it whatever she liked. It didn’t seem fair. She hadn’t screamed for a good while, but thought she might open her mouth and let out a shriek, which sometimes still seemed the best way to make herself understood. Then she saw Margarete’s dark eyes widen and her brow crease and she knew she would have to go along with what she’d been told.

‘But why didn’t you get a dolly and a proper cake and lots of smiles?’ Ilse asked. She could feel Margarete’s head moving from side to side on the pillow.

‘I tried to explain earlier, Liebling, but it was difficult.’ She whispered in a much lower tone than usual. ‘There is a war now and it is Germany against Britain. This is terrible for everyone, but more so for us.’

Ilse couldn’t think what she and Margarete had to do with it. ‘Why for us?’ she asked.

‘Our place of birth against the country we were sent to for safety. It means that we cannot go back to Germany.’

The thought of going back to the place of broken glass and shadowy, suffocating cupboards gave Ilse the shivers. Despite not being able to see her friend, Renate, she would much rather stay here where there was birthday cake and a swing and Daisy to play with. ‘Do we want to go back?’ she asked.

‘No, of course not. Germany was horrible to us. But what will we do if the English people start to dislike us, too?’

It was very hard for Ilse to imagine Judith or even Mr and Mrs Kingfisher, who were lovely, suddenly not liking them. She was about to question Margarete again when the older girl said, ‘The Germans think of us as enemies because we are Jewish. Now the English might look on us as

their enemy because we are German. I do not think it will be easy to fit in, but we must try.'

Mrs Frost and Mrs Kingfisher had spent two days putting up blackout curtains to keep the light from leaking into the night. Their faces had been set and solemn and they didn't talk about anything that wasn't connected to the task. When they'd finished, Mrs Kingfisher had told the three girls that once the curtains were drawn at night they were not allowed to touch the inky material. 'It must not be moved,' she'd said. 'If the Jerries come for us — which seems highly likely — we mustn't guide them with the tiniest chink of light. Mrs Frost will be doing the same in her house, won't you, Mrs Frost?'

'Everyone will,' Mrs Frost said, a serious look on her face. 'All over the country. We must be very careful when it comes to those Jerries.' Then she covered her mouth with her hand and looked as if she'd said something wrong. 'Not you lovely girls, of course,' she added quickly. 'Bless you.'

'Of course not,' Mrs Kingfisher said. 'Margarete and Ilse are British now. Or as near as.'

Ilse was confused. Margarete had gone very red and stared down at her feet for a long time. Ilse wondered why Jerry, the nice man in the paper shop who sometimes put an extra sweet in their bags, wasn't allowed to see light during the night. Also, why was he suddenly being talked about as if he were one of lots of men with the same name? She had meant to ask Margarete, but then Daisy dropped her ball right at Ilse's feet and she forgot all about it. Just as well, really — like so many other things, she probably wouldn't have understood.

Shadows moved backwards and forwards across the bottom of their door as Mr and Mrs Kingfisher moved between their bedroom and the bathroom. Their slippered footsteps were light and the girls could hear the gentle swishing noise of their heavy woollen dressing gowns flapping around their ankles.

Then Margarete suddenly sat upright and listened intently, as if she'd heard a different sound. 'Sssh,' she hissed, close to Ilse's ear. The heel of her hand accidentally pinched the flesh on Ilse's arm and the little girl cried out before she could stop herself.

The soft noises in the hallway stopped and, after a beat, Mrs Kingfisher called out, 'Are you all right, girls?'

Margarete clamped her hand over Ilse's mouth and answered, 'Yes, we are fine. Goodnight, Mrs Kingfisher.'

There was another wavering pause, then Mrs Kingfisher mumbled, 'Night,' and shuffled away.

Slowly, Margarete peeled her hand from Ilse's face, but as a warning she kept her finger glued to her mouth. Ilse saw that she was hot and bothered when she repeated the command to shush. 'This is why we will not speak in German anymore,' she whispered in a rush.

'But,' Ilse stammered. She felt tears gathering. 'You said in our room it would be okay.' Her little hand fumbled for her sister's in the dark.

'Things have changed because of the war. We cannot risk it.' Margarete's back was so straight and rigid, it seemed to Ilse as if her sister were looming over her. 'If anyone hears us speaking German they might think we are against them and then I do not know what will happen, but it will not be good. It is up to me to keep you safe and that is what I am going to do. Do you understand? And . . . and . . .'

She hesitated, then ploughed ahead. 'We will have to change our names.'

'Like Renate has to be Rosie?' Ilse couldn't believe it.

'Yes, exactly like that.'

'Who will I be?' Ilse thought she might be able to warm to the idea. It seemed like a good game. 'Ursula or Helga? You can be Heike or Inge or Erika.'

'No, Ilse. That will not do. The whole point is that we must blend in and sound British. And it will be easier if we stick to names similar to our own. I will be Margaret and you will be . . . Elsie. I will tell Mrs Kingfisher in the morning. She will be very happy with us.'

'What about Kathe?' Elsie asked.

'There is a girl in my class called Kathy, with a y at the end instead of an e, so I know that is English. From now on, Kathe will be Kathy.'

Elsie could make out Margaret's eyes as they darted all over the darkened room. Her hair stuck to her forehead in strands and a thin, chalky line of spittle had formed over her bottom lip. She reminded Elsie of a wild thing in a storybook, so she decided to glue her jaws together and not ask any more questions — at least not for tonight.

'And do you remember when Judish said our last name sounds like the English word for a tree branch? Bower?' Margaret spelled it out in a

fevered rush.

‘I think so,’ Elsie said, although she wasn’t sure.

‘I will tell Mrs Kingfisher that we are going to be known by that name, too.’

‘But how will I remember?’ Elsie said. There were so many things to remember. Or forget.

‘Think of the branch that holds the swing. Now, we know all the words in English, so next we must work on our accents so we sound like Judish, okay?’

‘Okay, meine Schwester.’ Elsie nodded against the pillow.

‘No, Elsie. No more German. It is not funny. We must start now and melt into the background like two . . .’ Margaret struggled to remember the right words and, when she did, she sounded almost like her foster sister. ‘Ice lollies on a summer’s day.’

‘Mmm,’ Elsie said, rubbing her stomach and licking her lips. ‘I like them.’

‘Yes, so do I,’ Margaret said. She put her arm around Elsie and held on so tightly that the tiny girl felt a bit trapped. ‘Let us practise until we fall asleep. We will try Judish’s name. Judish,’ she recited, her teeth together.

‘Judish,’ Elsie repeated.

‘No, we have to put our tongues between our teeth. ‘Judith! There, I said it. Your go again.’

‘Judish.’

‘*Th, th . . .* Stick your tongue right out.’

‘That is very naughty.’

‘It is okay.’ Margaret laughed for the first time in the entire day.

‘Judish, Judish, Judith,’ Elsie said at last.

‘Well done, Lieb— my love. Now sleep.’

‘Goodnight, Margaret.’ The name sounded alien in her mouth. But she closed her eyes, held Kathy close and wondered if anyone would call her that lovely, lilting term of endearment — *Liebling* — ever again.

Chapter 15

Friday 8 September 1939

Margaret

There had always been so many children in the classrooms that the windows streamed with condensation and the air was stale and stuffy. But by the Friday after war was announced, there were at least double the number of pupils sitting in every available space that could be found. They seemed to be coming out of the woodwork. The English they spoke was like another foreign language. It was harsh and didn't seem to include aitches at the beginning of words. They elbowed their way around, shouted at each other in the playground and scratched their heads so much their scalps must have bled — Margaret knew what that meant as all the children in the orphanage had often suffered with lice, too.

At first the newcomers didn't pay much attention to Margaret and Elsie; then it seemed to dawn on them that there were Germans among them, and the girls found themselves surrounded by a mob of braying children again. 'Give us an 'eil 'itler,' one of the boys shouted from across the playground. 'So we can smash your faces in.'

Margaret cowered against the wall with her arms around Elsie.

'You're gonna be sent back,' another one jeered.

'Yeah, back to Germany where all the Jerries belong. We don't want you 'ere,' a girl with crusty sores around her mouth called out.

Their faces were contorted with hatred. Elsie started to shake and Margaret thought the little girl would open her mouth and scream for all she was worth, which would draw even more attention to them.

A boy wearing shorts that reached to below his knees deliberately bounced a ball hard enough to hit Margaret in the face. She cried out and Elsie's eyes widened in terror. That made the whole horde burst into horrible, hollow laughter. They sounded like a pack of hyenas.

'Oi,' someone at the back shouted, 'if there's a bombing raid, we're gonna make sure you don't get into the shelter.'

'Yeah, let the Jerries get two of their own.' A very tiny boy joined in.

'Excuse me!' The headmaster's voice boomed into the crowd. 'I will not tolerate this in my school, war or no war.' He blew his whistle and

waved the children off to the far corners of the playground. Only one child remained — Judith, who peered at Margaret and Elsie from behind the headmaster's back. 'Thank you, Miss Kingfisher, for alerting me to this ridiculous behaviour. Misses Bower, you may resume your playtime.'

But that was the furthest thing from Margaret's mind. She took Elsie's hand and scuttled as far away as she could from the children playing hopscotch and skipping rope, leaving Judith to stand on her own.

That evening, Margaret asked Judith why there were so many new children at school. Her grasp of the language had improved so much that she dreamed in English now, but it wasn't good enough yet to understand Judith's answer. Patiently, her foster sister scoured the book for a long time and eventually said in German that it was because of something called evacuation.

'Like me.' Margaret patted her chest. 'And Elsie?'

'No.' Judith shook her head and flicked through the dictionary again. 'You and Elsie are refugees, not evacuees.'

They sounded like one and the same to Margaret and she began to fret about whether she and Elsie would be shipped on another long journey to another country, house and family. The thought made her mind race. It was supposed to be safe here. Would there be more broken glass and taunts in the streets? Would soldiers try to separate her and Elsie? The thought of going through all of that again, and maybe more, made her feel as if she could not bear the pressure for another minute. As she had predicted, Mrs Shulman hadn't been to visit again, and there was no one else she could articulate her fears to, so she kept them buried. Instead, she put all her energy into learning the nuances of the language and trying hard to fade into the background.

* * *

Margaret had always thought war would be noisy and messy and frightening, with buildings being bombed to dust and people cowering under any makeshift shelter they could find. But this war was very subdued. From time to time, there was a short burst from the air-raid siren, which, of course, everyone took seriously.

There was also rationing, though it still left Margaret and Elsie with more to eat than they'd had in the orphanage. One good thing came of it:

there was no longer the same powerful, all-pervading, rancid smell of bacon that there used to be. It was one of the first foods to be rationed and Margaret — who remained steadfast in her personal ban on eating the vile meat — was appalled by some of the comments people made when they heard the evening news. Mrs Frost had said, her mouth turning down, ‘I don’t know what I’ll give Mr Frost for breakfast now.’

‘We all have to make sacrifices,’ Mrs Kingfisher replied. ‘Judith and Mr Kingfisher also enjoy a good rasher. As do I.’ She lowered her voice, but Margaret strained to hear as she’d done in the orphanage. ‘I think I told you a while ago that Elsie is fine now with pork, but Margaret . . .’ Margaret could imagine her shaking her head. ‘Won’t touch a morsel. “No,” she says, very politely, mind you. And even though her English is improving, she crosses her arms over her chest for emphasis and looks away, hoping we won’t notice her disdain.’

‘I’m not sure how the child can resist the aroma, bless her heart,’ Mrs Frost said, plumping a chair cushion. ‘Mr Frost always says the smell is almost as good as the taste.’

‘If she gets hungry enough she’ll eat it, I suppose,’ Mrs Kingfisher said. ‘But let’s hope it won’t come to that and this is as bad as the war gets.’

‘Perhaps it’ll be over before a bomb is dropped.’

‘Yes.’ Mrs Kingfisher laughed. ‘And we will have lived through the shortest war in history.’

Margaret shuddered as she tiptoed away from her spyhole. She couldn’t envisage hunger terrible enough to entice her to sink her teeth into pork. It was okay for Elsie — who was tiny and needed to eat — although Margaret couldn’t watch when the little girl shovelled Spam or a chop or crackling into her mouth. It was more than she could bear when the otherwise perfect child rubbed her stomach after she’d cleared her plate and said, ‘Mmm, I like it.’

Days and weeks went by and nothing happened. No bombs, no soldiers, no broken glass. Every day after school, the three girls helped Mrs Kingfisher in her Dig for Victory! garden. In well-worn clothes the four of them tackled whatever needed to be done, and felt very sad when they had to pull up the beautiful daffodils, tulips and hyacinths that had been so lovingly cultivated.

‘Don’t worry,’ Mrs Kingfisher said, putting her foot against a spade and digging into the earth. ‘We have to do our bit — and just think of the lovely fresh veg we’ll get to eat.’

Margaret wondered why they hadn’t done the same at the orphanage, but she’d never seen the equipment they needed — seeds and tools, watering cans, labels on stakes — hanging around in the caretaker’s shed. Despite the reason for the new garden, Margaret loved the work; they all did.

‘Margaret,’ Mrs Kingfisher said. ‘Please carry over the bags of fertiliser. You have more strength than the other girls.’

‘Yes, Mrs Kingfisher,’ Margaret said. She didn’t mind. She knew she was taller and bigger than a lot of children her age and it felt good to be chosen for the heavier tasks. Although it did occur to her that Judith and Elsie wouldn’t build themselves up if they didn’t tackle some of the jobs that needed a bit more weight behind them.

Mrs Kingfisher mucked in and seemed to know everything there was to know about growing vegetables, from how to propagate seeds to how to set out rows of onions, potatoes and beetroot. ‘I used to love helping on my grandfather’s farm,’ she said one day. ‘What fun we had. Up at the crack of dawn for the eggs. Outside every day. Fresh produce to eat at mealtimes.’

‘I remember you telling me about that, Mum,’ Judith said.

‘Then he passed away and my father and uncles didn’t want the farm, so it was sold.’ Mrs Kingfisher sounded wistful as she stamped the mud off her wellingtons.

Until they’d started the garden, Margaret would not have been able to imagine Mrs Kingfisher on a farm. She was always so immaculate and sophisticated. She wanted to ask questions about Mrs Kingfisher’s life — as she would a real mother — but thought that wouldn’t be a polite thing to do.

Fortunately, Elsie was not old enough to have such qualms. ‘Is Mr Kingfisher a farmer?’ she asked as she carefully laid a net over a patch of courgettes.

Judith and Mrs Kingfisher laughed out loud. ‘Oh, Elsie,’ Mrs Kingfisher said. ‘You are so funny. Mr Kingfisher wouldn’t know hay from straw, or one end of a cow from the other. No, he works in government. That’s why he’s often late or not here at all. I forget sometimes that there’s so much you can’t possibly know about us.’

‘He’s quite high up, isn’t he, Mum?’ Judith looked very proud.

‘Yes,’ Mrs Kingfisher said without much conviction. ‘I suppose so. Now, let’s have one more sweep for pesky weeds, then go indoors and have tea.’

Margaret didn’t know what position Mr Kingfisher held, but it sounded as though he had some sort of authority. That could mean one of two things. Either they would be safe because he would know a lot about what was going on, or people would find out there were two German girls living with him and his family and make all their lives hard.

While they were getting changed, Margaret saw Rosie peeping out from under the bed. ‘I think you should take Rosie down to tea,’ Margaret said. ‘So Mrs Kingfisher does not think you are ungrateful.’

‘I only want to take Kathy,’ Elsie said stubbornly.

‘Maybe just this once?’ Margaret cajoled. ‘Come on, pick her up and let’s go down. Mrs Kingfisher will be ever so pleased to see you with her.’

‘Tea is ready, girls,’ Mrs Kingfisher greeted them. ‘Oh, look. You have Rosie with you, Elsie. You look beautiful together.’

Downstairs, there was shepherd’s pie and a small pile of greens on their plates. A man’s hypnotic voice filtered through from the radio and it was just light enough for the curtains to be open, the last of the sunshine dappling the windowsill. The heady smell of overturned earth, grass and line-dried clothes wafted around them. For some reason, when Margaret inhaled the lovely, fresh bouquet she felt hopeful, as if there was a possibility that everything might be all right with the world — even though she knew in her heart that it wasn’t.

‘I have a message for Margaret and Elsie from Mr Kingfisher,’ Mrs Kingfisher said.

Margaret grabbed Elsie’s hand under the table. That had never happened before and it sent the optimistic feeling flying away from her in a rush, only to be replaced with the grip of anxiety. Did he want to tell them they would be evacuated? Or perhaps he had decided they should sleep in separate bedrooms or have less food because of rationing?

But Mrs Kingfisher was smiling, so maybe the news wouldn’t be too bad. ‘He asked me to tell you that he is proud of you for working so hard on your English. I am pleased with you, too. Well done.’

Margaret felt as if she could breathe again. 'Thank you,' she said. 'That is very kind of him, is it not, Elsie? We are both glad to be speaking English.' She gently nudged Elsie. 'Say thank you to Mr Kingfisher.'

Elsie's eyes flitted around the room as if she were looking for Mr Kingfisher's hiding place. 'Thank you, Mr Kingfisher,' she called in a loud voice.

That made all of them laugh and Mrs Kingfisher patted Elsie's face.

'He also wanted me to congratulate Judith, on his behalf, for being such a marvellous teacher.'

Margaret couldn't remember Mr or Mrs Kingfisher ever giving Judith much praise, so this must have been a momentous occasion for her foster sister, who beamed and turned bright red. She thought about all the times she had snubbed Judith and warned Elsie to be wary of her, but that had been founded on the belief that Judith was trying to drive a wedge between her and Elsie — and she couldn't risk that. Guilt welled inside her and tears threatened to spill down her face. Judith was really no different from her. Or from Elsie. All three of them wanted someone to comfort, help, teach, keep safe and love, and have that same degree of tenderness bestowed upon them in return.

Margaret glanced over at Judith, who was finishing her tea with the smile still plastered on her face. Surely she had proven herself with the way she'd helped them with English, spoken up for them at school, shared her toys and books and Daisy? It suddenly seemed as if trusting Judith and treating her in the same sisterly way she did Elsie would be the easiest thing in the world. The risk Margaret had imagined Judith posed simply vanished, and Margaret felt lighter for its having disappeared. 'Thank you, Judith,' Margaret leaned across the table and grabbed her foster sister's hand. 'For teaching us English.'

'Thank you, Judith,' Elsie parroted.

Judith's jaw unhinged and she stared at Margaret. 'You're welcome,' she said, swinging her legs backwards and forwards under the table with delight.

'Judith!' Mrs Kingfisher sounded at the end of her tether. 'You know that sort of behaviour is forbidden.'

'Sorry, Mum,' Judith said. But she caught Margaret's eye and together they pumped their feet one more time before sitting as still as possible, a

bemused Mrs Kingfisher staring suspiciously from one to the other.

Chapter 16

Friday 17 May 1940

Judith

If it wasn't for the war everything would be perfect. At last Margaret is treating me like I'm her and Elsie's sister and we're all having a lot of fun. I tiptoe into their room at night and, because they still snuggle up together in one of the single beds, Daisy and I get into the other and we talk and laugh until we fall asleep. If Mum knows about this she hasn't said a word, which means that she either doesn't check on us before she goes to bed or she's happy to let us be.

Most of those horrid evacuees have gone back to where they came from and that's made school so much better. They didn't get a chance to do any of the horrid things to Margaret and Elsie that they'd threatened because the Jerries didn't drop any bombs so there was no need for us to dive for cover in a shelter. We have had practice runs, though and once a couple of snotty-nosed boys tried to push Margaret and Elsie back up the steps but I got in between them and told them my dad knew Churchill and he would send them to prison. That did the trick and they left the girls alone after that.

It wasn't a lie about the prime minister, Dad does know him. He and Mum left the sitting room window open while I was outside with Daisy and I overheard them talking.

'Yes,' Mum had said. 'I know Chamberlain resigned. There's been nothing else on the radio all day. Do you think it will affect you?'

'It already has.' Dad cleared his throat. 'I've been moved to the War Office, and I'll be working directly with Churchill's cabinet in the new national coalition government he's setting up.'

So I'd been right all along about Dad being quite high up, and now it sounded as though he'd been given one of the very top jobs.

Something that sounded like a tangle of knitting needles hit the floor, followed by a gasp from Mum. 'Oh, Henry,' she said. 'A promotion. What did you say?'

'I didn't have to think about it for long. I said it was an honour and I would serve my country in any way I could.'

‘That’s wonderful,’ Mum gushed. ‘I must get the house ready for entertaining. Do you think Churchill himself will come for dinner?’

I was rather taken aback to hear Mum go on in that vein. What happened to her love of life on the farm? I’d much rather be messing about in the dirt than hobnobbing with a lot of people in stuffy suits.

‘Helena.’ Dad’s tone of voice was much firmer than usual. ‘I don’t think you should count on Churchill, or anyone else of note, coming here for anything. They won’t have the time or the inclination. In case you haven’t noticed, there’s a war going on. In fact, I may hardly be home myself.’

‘I know all about the war, Henry,’ Mum said. ‘Come outside and see what we’ve done in the garden and then we’ll have a celebratory drink.’

I bet Dad blinked a few times behind his spectacles, but he put aside whatever else he had to think about and let Mum give him a guided tour of the vegetables. That meant they were headed my way, so I had to pretend I hadn’t heard a thing.

Margaret likes to snoop, too. I didn’t find out about that until she came haring into my bedroom one afternoon, shut the door behind her and said she’d heard the milkman talking to Mrs Frost.

‘What were they saying?’ I’d asked.

‘The milkman—’ Margaret had to stop to catch her breath. ‘Said that we are in a phoney war. What is phoney?’

I thought hard because I’d been trying to explain words without having to resort to the book. ‘It’s when something isn’t real. It’s fake.’

Margaret sat on the edge of my bed and looked surprised. ‘Oh, so there is no war?’

‘I’m quite sure there is.’ I shrugged. ‘One’s been declared anyway.’

I don’t think either of us really knew what was going on. All we did was go to school, read, play, dig the garden, take care of Daisy and listen behind closed doors. ‘It’s because nothing much has happened,’ I carried on, trying to make sense of it.

‘But that is good, yes?’ Margaret said. ‘We will be safe.’

I didn’t have a clue so couldn’t make any promises about that. But Margaret often looked so worried that lines had started to crawl along her forehead. All she was bothered about was everyone being safe — especially Elsie.

‘Come on,’ I said. ‘Let’s help Elsie with her puzzle. And we’ll see if we can pester Mum into letting us have a biscuit.’

‘Or Mrs Frost. She always gives in.’

‘And we might hear some more grown-up talk if we listen carefully.’

‘Yes,’ I agreed. ‘But sometimes it makes things even more jumbled in my head than they were before.’

Together, we looked over the banister and saw little Elsie sitting on the floor with a puzzle piece in each of her dimpled hands. Her blonde hair was in the plaits Margaret insisted upon and she was wearing a tartan skirt and Fair Isle jumper. She was singing a song to herself and seemed so perfectly content that I forgot Margaret and I had been talking about a war. Then she saw us and, waving the pieces in the air, shouted, ‘I can’t do it! Help me!’ And the spell was broken.

Sometimes we don’t see Dad for days on end. Not that it matters too much, as he often isn’t really here even when he is. If I’m half-awake when he comes in, I hear him pacing in his study and pulling the stopper from the sherry bottle before trudging up to bed. Other times, he doesn’t come home at all or leaves before we get up in the morning.

Mum smokes a lot more cigarettes than she used to and drinks a lot when Mrs Clarke visits. They stop talking as soon as any of us — the children, I mean — walk into the room. That happens with any grown-up who comes to the house. Even Mrs Frost, who is usually very chatty. In fact, when I think about it, all the grown-ups seem to be hiding something from us.

Then today we had a big upset about Daisy. We were throwing sticks for her on the Common when an old woman walked up to us and said, ‘You should be ashamed of yourselves.’ It was windy and a wire of white hair had escaped her headscarf, skittering around as if it had torn itself free from the tail end of a cloud. There was a bit of dried food on her coat and she was carrying a tatty shopping bag.

The three of us gazed around to see who she was talking to and soon realised it was us.

‘Is that dog yours?’ she demanded.

‘Yes,’ I said, grabbing Daisy’s collar. She had a stick in her mouth and her whole rump was wagging from side to side.

‘I had to put my dog to sleep and you should have done the same.’

Margaret and Elsie looked upset and I'm sure my face mirrored theirs. Elsie flopped down on the grass and put her little arms around Daisy's neck.

'Aren't you that important man's daughter?' the woman asked.

'I don't know,' was all I said, not because I didn't know whose daughter I was, but because something told me Dad wouldn't want me to talk about his work.

She looked half-demented, maybe because she thought I was being cheeky but most probably because she'd had to have her dog put down. I would be exactly the same if it had been Daisy.

'I'm going to have a word with your father. The law shouldn't apply to one and not others.'

We got frightened then and decided as one that we ought to make a run for it. Margaret picked up Daisy and we scarpered home as fast as we could, checking over our shoulders to make sure the woman wasn't hobbling behind us.

The smell of cake baking in the oven hit us when we fell in the door, but the thought of eating turned my stomach. We found Mum and told her the whole story. 'It's all right, girls,' she said. 'There was no order to get rid of pets, but some people took it upon themselves to put their animals to sleep because they thought it would save on food.'

'But why didn't you tell me?' Daisy licked the salt from the tears I couldn't control.

Mum shook her head. 'There was no need for you to know. You would have only worried yourself sick. I know the woman you mean. She's very elderly and her dog was probably her only companion, so you can feel some sympathy for her.'

I could, for her having lost her dog, but other than that I thought she was horrid.

'But what if she comes to see Dad and he thinks that because he works for Churchill we'll have to do the same to Daisy.'

'He won't,' Mum said. 'He'll talk to her and be very reasonable and she will go away apologising to him.' She smiled. 'Avoid the Common for a few days and she'll forget all about it. Now, would you like a bit of courgette cake?'

I nodded, my stomach a bit calmer. The girls were probably over their fright, too, because they agreed.

We took the soap to the outside tap and turned it on to a trickle, which gave us a chance to hear Mum talking to Mrs Frost. 'There's an old woman who walks around and doesn't always make a lot of sense. She used to have a little Jack Russell.'

'Oh,' Mrs Frost said. 'I know who you mean. What's happened to her?'

'She frightened the girls with some nonsense about having Daisy put down.'

'Oh dear,' Mrs Frost said. 'She's not all there. God love her.' I could imagine Mrs Frost touching her temple. 'But there's no need for that.'

'No,' Mum sighed. 'Let's hope that today's news about Dunkirk gives her something else to think about.'

Crockery and cutlery rattled as the cake was cut and Elsie said, 'Mmm, I like it.'

'What is Dunkirk?' Margaret mouthed to me.

'A beach in France,' I said. That was all I could tell her because I didn't know anything else. We traipsed into the kitchen and ate the cake made with courgettes from the garden, which gave it a rather special flavour. I let Daisy have half of mine under the table and I didn't care one bit if Mum saw me.

Chapter 17

Saturday 26 October 1940

Elsie

The air-raid siren wailed and for a split second everyone stood like statues. All they could do was stare at each other. Then Judith started to cry because she had to put Daisy into a crate that reminded her of a prison cell. Mrs Kingfisher picked up the gas masks and two large bags she had ready and waiting. Margaret grabbed one of Elsie's hands and Judith the other and they ran towards the shelter in Commercial Road.

There were so many planes overhead that Elsie couldn't count them. She tried, but had to give up. The metal birds chased each other up and down the river, which looked like fun at first, until fire came out of some of them; then it was scary.

When they made it down into the deep shelter, Mrs Kingfisher murmured, 'Thank God.' They joined the crowds, who were packed wall to wall with more following on behind. It reminded Elsie of somewhere she'd once been and hadn't liked at all — a dark, smelly cupboard where she and other children had been crammed. She looked around frantically and wondered if all the grown-ups would suddenly leave, or if someone would turn off all the lights, or if the children would be told to keep very quiet. Pins and needles crept up her legs and she couldn't remember where she'd put Kathy. Had she dropped her on the way? Mrs Kingfisher would never let her go back until the all-clear, by which time anything could have happened to the doll. She searched her pockets and there was the sock, safe in her grasp. Kathy was here. Margaret had her by the hand and there were Mrs Kingfisher and Judith. Surely all those things meant that this would not be anything like the terrifying night in the orphanage when the glass had been broken.

They saw a lot of people they recognised, but they all looked too exhausted to say hello except Mrs Clarke, who waved them over to where she was sitting with her mother. Margaret carried Elsie across the concrete floor and they passed the man from the shop, the milkman and a lot of children from school with their mummies and brothers and sisters.

This wasn't the first time the screeching sirens had drilled their shrill warning into Elsie's ears. But all those other times Mrs Kingfisher had said, 'Another false alarm, girls,' when the all-clear sounded soon after the racket had begun. This time, though, she stood Elsie next to her and instructed Margaret and Judith to line up at the urn and get them each a cup of tea. That probably meant they were going to stay for a while, and she didn't like the idea of that. Where would they sleep and go to the toilet? How would they brush their teeth? And she wanted to be with Margaret, who was walking away from her and might never come back. She put Kathy over her fist, pulled away from Mrs Kingfisher and ran through the packed shelter, shouting for her sister.

'Elsie, don't be silly,' Mrs Kingfisher called out. 'Come back. Please, stop that child from leaving.' A man bent down and tried to catch her, but she sidestepped him while an older boy from school laughed in her face.

Then Margaret flew through the hordes towards her and lifted her in her arms. 'I was not going to leave you, my little love,' she said. 'I was only getting a cup of tea for Mrs Kingfisher.'

'But I don't like it here.' Elsie could feel Margaret's heart racing as fast as her own and that made her start to cry. 'It's . . . not nice. I want to go home.'

'I know,' Margaret said. 'But at the moment it is more frightening and dangerous outside than it is down here. And we must not draw attention to ourselves. Remember I told you that?'

Everyone nearby was staring at them. Elsie could feel their eyes pinpointing her and she buried her face in Margaret's neck. 'They're the unaccompanied girls Mr and Mrs Kingfisher have taken in,' she heard one woman say to another.

'A dinner lady at the school told me that the little one looks like an angel, but when she doesn't get her way she screams the place down.'

'Mrs Kingfisher's got her work cut out for her then,' said a third woman who had joined them.

'Am I the little one they're talking about?' Elsie asked Margaret.

'Do not listen to them,' Margaret said. 'They do not know anything about us.'

Mrs Kingfisher rushed to them and tried to take Elsie from Margaret, but the little girl wriggled her way more firmly into Margaret's arms. The

women who had been saying things about Elsie smiled and greeted Mrs Kingfisher as if she were one of their dearest friends, which was very puzzling. 'Elsie,' Mrs Kingfisher said. 'You gave me quite a fright. You must stay with one of us while we are in the shelter.'

That was what Elsie had been trying to do, but she had wanted to stay with Margaret, not her foster mother.

'There are too many people down here for you to go tearing off to look for Margaret. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Mrs Kingfisher,' Elsie replied, holding Kathy close to her chest.

Judith appeared beside them with a tray laden with cups of tea and they followed behind Mrs Kingfisher, who shook her head and rolled her eyes in frustration when she saw Mrs Clarke again.

'Did you see the strafing?' Mrs Clarke's mother asked. She was wearing a dark green coat and carpet slippers.

'Yes,' Mrs Kingfisher said. 'Wasn't it awful? Far too close for comfort.'

'Unbelievable,' Mrs Clarke said. 'Is everything all right with Elsie now?'

'I think so. She's got Margaret.'

The two women glanced over and studied Elsie and Margaret for a few long moments before they turned back to each other.

A man sitting against a wall took off his spectacles and gave his face a good rub with a white handkerchief while his wife unwrapped a couple of slices of bread and butter. Three little boys bounced a ball back and forth until someone asked them to stop, and a strange smell made Elsie wrinkle her nose with distaste.

'Please hand out the tea, Judith,' Mrs Kingfisher said. 'I can't remember ever needing one more.'

Judith, her eyes red and inflamed from crying about Daisy, blinked several times before sharing out the tea. That reminded Elsie of Mr Kingfisher and she wondered if Judith would look as serious as her father if she had to wear glasses, too.

'Thank you, Judith dear,' Mrs Clarke said as she took a cup from Judith's outstretched hand. 'I didn't expect you to get one for me and Mother, but it's very kind of you indeed. It's not bad, but I wish I'd packed up something stronger we could share, Helena.'

They all sipped their tea in silence for a few minutes, until Mrs Kingfisher recovered enough to reply. 'I know exactly what you mean. I'm going to put that on my list of items to include with the other provisions. And I think we'd better have a new plan for the next raid.' She dived into one of her large bags and spread a blanket out for all of them to sit on.

'Do you think there'll be another one?' Judith sniffled. 'Daisy will be petrified.'

'Judith,' Mrs Kingfisher said, reaching for Judith's hand. 'I have absolutely no way of knowing. This could be the last one or they might go on for months. I'm so sorry about Daisy. I love that dog as much as you do, but we've been over this. The choices are limited and you know which one your father and I favour. Do you want us to make the ultimate decision?'

Elsie didn't think Mrs Kingfisher was telling the truth. No one in the world loved Daisy as much as Judith did, and to prove it a huge teardrop slithered down Judith's face and burst when it fell onto the back of her hand. She'd heard Judith and Margaret talking about the choices Mrs Kingfisher had mentioned. Tears had streaked Judith's face when she said she would have to send Daisy to the country or lock her in a crate every time there was an air raid, or the vet could give her an injection so she would go to sleep for ever — like the dog that had belonged to the old woman on the Common.

'What would you do if you were me?' Judith had asked Margaret.

Elsie could tell that Margaret was trying very hard to be helpful, but tears had filled her eyes. 'I would not put her to sleep,' she said. 'And the thought of making her stay in a crate seems . . . well . . . cruel.' Margaret had pulled a length of hair from her plait and twirled it around and around. 'I would send her to the country. That way you can get her back when the war is over, which will probably be very quickly. And perhaps she will go to a farm like Mrs Kingfisher's grandfather used to have. That sounded lovely. Think how happy Daisy would be.'

But Judith couldn't bear it and she'd decided to keep Daisy with her. Now she was trembling with worry and fear that Daisy would free herself from the crate and run away or become so frightened that she'd be ill. 'I'll send her to the country,' she said in a small, quavering voice. 'And I will get her back after the war.' She lifted her chin and looked at each of them. 'You are my witnesses.'

‘Good girl,’ Mrs Kingfisher said. ‘I will arrange it.’

‘You are very brave,’ Margaret said.

Elsie noticed that they all had to make a great effort to swallow and get their words out, which she thought meant they were trying not to sob. All she could think to do was lean over and press Kathy into Judith’s hands.

‘Thank you, Elsie,’ Judith said. And she held Kathy close for a few moments.

Mrs Kingfisher blew her nose, then carried on with her revised plan. ‘In that case, you can be given a new job, Judith,’ she said, sounding more like her usual self. ‘I’ll have to redistribute the load as carrying the bag and the gas masks and holding Elsie’s hand will simply be too much for me, I’m afraid.’

‘I like holding Margaret and Judith’s hands,’ Elsie piped up. ‘It’s fun.’

‘That’s the problem, Elsie,’ Mrs Kingfisher said. ‘This is not a game like going to the shops or the park. And after today’s escape attempt, I’ve decided I must take one of your hands as I have responsibility for you. Judith can carry the gas masks and hold your other hand and Margaret can carry the bags as she is so strong.’

Margaret’s face turned puce. She was always very polite when she spoke to Mrs Kingfisher, but this time she almost shouted. ‘That is not true,’ she said. ‘I am responsible for my sister. ‘I will hold the bags in one hand and Elsie in the other. I will not allow . . .’

‘Oh,’ Mrs Kingfisher said, completely taken aback. ‘You won’t allow what, young lady?’

Mrs Clarke stared into the tea she was rapidly stirring, and her mother made a point of looking around with feigned interest in anything other than the argument going on next to her.

Margaret’s mouth twitched and Mrs Kingfisher’s nostrils flared as they stared at each other.

Then Margaret seemed to soften. ‘I beg your pardon, Mrs Kingfisher,’ she said, twisting a loose wave of hair around her finger. ‘I used the wrong words. Sometimes English is still hard for me.’

‘Thank you for the apology, Margaret,’ Mrs Kingfisher said. ‘I accept it, of course. And please leave your hair alone. What’s the point of buying you a lovely brush and comb set if the next minute you pull it out of place?’

Elsie didn't understand what had happened and what it might mean for her, but she knew it wasn't good. She moved closer to Margaret and grasped her hand.

'But now that you've had a minute to think about it,' Mrs Kingfisher said, smiling sweetly at Margaret. 'Perhaps you can tell me what you did mean when you said you would not allow . . . what?'

Judith looked embarrassed and Elsie wondered if this was what she meant when she said her mother always had to have the last word.

'I meant,' Margaret said in a steady voice. 'That when Elsie and I found each other, I made a pledge to keep her safe and that is what I will always do. It is a promise like the one Judith made to Daisy.'

Elsie waited for Mrs Kingfisher to tell Margaret she was a good girl — in the same way she'd praised Judith — or for someone to say that she was brave. But no one said a word until eventually Mrs Kingfisher said, 'Well I . . .' she laid her hand on her chest for a few moments. 'Will allow you to hold one of Elsie's hands if and when there is another air raid. That is MY decision.'

'Yes, Mrs Kingfisher,' Margaret said meekly. 'Thank you very much.'

Mrs Kingfisher pursed her lips, then told Margaret to take Judith and Elsie to the toilet so they could try to settle down to sleep.

The lights had been dimmed by the time they returned, and they lay down on the blanket with their coats over them. Judith sniffled on and off and Elsie said she could keep Kathy until the morning. There were so many things that Elsie wanted to ask Margaret about, but there would be no more talking tonight. Instead, Elsie put her thumb in her mouth and listened to the sounds of hundreds of others around them — shuffling, coughing, snoring, snorting, slurping on tea and turning the pages of newspapers. She could hear Margaret's rhythmic breathing and wondered how her sister could have fallen asleep so quickly.

Then Mrs Kingfisher whispered to Mrs Clarke. 'I'd give anything for that stiff drink now, Iris.'

'I should say so,' said Mrs Clarke, letting out a long sigh. 'Is she like that all the time?'

'No,' Mrs Kingfisher said. 'She's usually, "Yes, Mrs Kingfisher. No, Mrs Kingfisher. Three bags full, Mrs Kingfisher." But I can see it in her.'

Disobedience, defiance and disdain. Henry and I will have to contain it somehow, I suppose.'

'Perhaps this was a one-off. You know — given the circumstances.' Mrs Clarke sounded as if she were sucking on a sweet. 'But can't you give her away if she continues to be so cheeky? Maybe she could go to the country with Daisy.'

Elsie had been very wrong about Margaret being asleep, because every single muscle in the older girl's body tightened. Then Judith nudged them with her foot, so she'd heard, too.

Mrs Kingfisher giggled. 'You are funny, Iris,' she said. 'If only we could. But as you know, she's just turned fourteen, so she'll finish school at Christmas. As good as her English is, it's not good enough for her to have any job other than in a factory or shop. What with that and the chores at home, she'll probably be too tired to be such a little madam.'

Elsie desperately wanted to look at Margaret for her reaction, but Margaret put her finger to Elsie's mouth and neither of them said a word. They stayed like that for a long time, the conversation between Mrs Kingfisher and Mrs Clarke going round and round in Elsie's mind until it made less sense than it had when she was listening to it.

The next thing she was aware of was the all-clear, and she immediately wondered if she'd dreamed everything she'd heard the night before, but Margaret and Judith's long faces told her that could not possibly be the case. Judith handed Kathy back and Elsie cuddled the doll tightly. Then they plodded wearily up the stairs to the street, where they were faced with the ruins of what used to be the menswear shop and a heap of dust that had once been Woolworth's. There was glass everywhere and that wasn't a dream, either — it was a horrible nightmare.

Chapter 18

November–December 1940

Margaret

Margaret was baffled because no one had mentioned anything to her about leaving school at Christmas. She'd expected Mrs Kingfisher to pounce on her with the news as soon as they woke up after the night in the shelter, but Mrs Kingfisher hadn't said a word and neither had Miss Edgars. If she asked, she'd be found out as an eavesdropper and that was the last thing she wanted. But the conversation she'd overheard that night whirled round and round in her head until she thought she would explode. Elsie, too, was full of as many questions as she was, if not more.

'Why did Mrs Kingfisher say those things that we heard?' the little girl had asked as soon as they were alone together.

Margaret didn't know if Elsie was referring to her being defiant or to her having to leave school soon, but she didn't want to explain how a gulf had been slowly carved out between her and Mrs Kingfisher about eating pork, the church excursion on Christmas Day, problems at school, caring for Elsie. And when she examined how the rift had unfolded, she thought that perhaps it went back to Mrs Kingfisher feeling forced to take her at Liverpool Street station when she'd really only wanted the little Dresden doll.

'Judith told me that in England children leave school at fourteen unless they are lucky enough to go on,' she replied.

'Are we lucky enough?' Elsie held Kathy close.

Margaret pulled the little girl up onto the bed next to her. 'I do not think I will be,' she said. 'But you might because you will have been going to school here since you were four.'

'What will you do while I'm at school?' Elsie was asking all the questions Margaret longed to have answered. 'Will you wait at home for me?'

'I will not stay at home, my little love,' Margaret said. 'I will be going out to work.'

Elsie's eyes widened. 'Are you a grown-up now?'

‘I suppose I am — almost.’ The thought made hot tears of anger threaten in Margaret’s eyes. She didn’t feel as if she’d ever really been a child, so how could she now be an adult? It was hard to feel ready for that change. In Germany, things would have been . . . she could not imagine how terrible they would have been — certainly nothing as favourable as the year or so she’d spent in the classroom here. But now, having been deemed incapable of anything more ambitious, she would be stuck in a shop or a factory before she’d had the chance to discover what other possibilities existed.

That night she left Elsie sleeping and wandered to the window, heavily clad with its blackout curtain. She wondered what would happen if she lifted the material for a moment and peeked outside at the sky. A warden might bang on the door, or a bomber might see the chink and blow the whole street to smithereens, or Mrs Kingfisher might choose that moment to check on them and the rift between them would become a huge crevasse, so she did not dare. Instead, she picked up a book about the ocean depths that lay open on the floor and flicked through the pages. It was a completely different, alien world, as were the stars and the planets and everything else in between. Worlds that would now remain beyond her comprehension, as would art and music, history and algebra. She wouldn’t learn the finer details of English or German, so wouldn’t be able to follow in Mrs Shulman’s footsteps or teach a class of children or write a book like the author who’d written the one on her lap. Judith and Elsie might well stay on at school after fourteen, in which case they would leave her behind while all she could do was desperately try to catch up.

A lump had gathered in her throat and she tried to swallow it down. Despite the fact that her schooldays were nearly over, she knew she was lucky — she could have been left behind in Germany or on the platform at Liverpool Street station — and she really did appreciate the opportunities she’d been given. She would go out to work if that was what lay in store for her, and she would make the most of it so she could always take care of Elsie.

* * *

At the beginning of December, a handful of pupils were taken out of the classroom and the remaining children, including Margaret, were told to

stay at their desks. Margaret felt her stomach churn. Either they'd done something very wrong or this was when they were going to be told that after Christmas their schooldays would be over. 'So.' Miss Edgars stood at the front of the room. 'You are all going to be leaving me in about three weeks' time. I'm sure your parents have told you all about it.'

Margaret looked around at the other children who sat listening with their hands folded on their desks. There was not a flicker of astonishment from any of them, so she gathered that she was the only one who hadn't been told in advance. She didn't want to think of Mrs Kingfisher as unkind or that she was still being punished for standing up for herself and Elsie in the shelter. But there were no other reasons she could think of for the snub. *Perhaps Mrs Kingfisher forgot*, she thought. After all, she was very busy with the Women's Institute and the Women's Voluntary Service. A photographer had been to the vegetable garden to take pictures for the newspaper; Mrs Clarke and a lot of other women regularly came to the house for sherry; a new shelter had been opened and she was asked to be the first one to go down into its depths. *Or maybe she knew I would be listening to her conversation that night and that's why she spoke in such a loud whisper. That way she could save herself the trouble of having to explain the situation to me.* A shiver made her tremble from head to feet. If that was the case, Mrs Kingfisher felt nothing more for her than tolerance because she was Elsie's sister. If she ever found out the truth, Margaret would be banished.

'I am going to write some possible jobs on the chalkboard,' Miss Edgars carried on. 'And I want you to list the three you most like the sound of on the pieces of paper I'm handing out. The school will then try its best to situate you in one of those. Yes, Alfred?' she said to a boy with floppy brown hair. 'You have a question?'

'Do I have to do this?' Alfred asked. 'I'm going to work with my dad.'

'Of course, I remember now,' Miss Edgars said. 'Lucky boy. No, just work on your tables. You'll need arithmetic in the butcher's shop. May, what do you want to ask?'

'Do you spell film with one L or two, Miss?'

Everyone stared at May, a tall girl with hair cut in the shape of a pudding bowl.

‘Well.’ Miss Edgars sounded taken aback. ‘Why do you want to know that just now?’

‘I want to be a film star,’ May said.

‘I see.’ Miss Edgars looked as if she was trying not to laugh. ‘That wasn’t one of the jobs I was going to write on the board. But the cinema wants two usherettes, so that might be for you.’

‘Yes, Miss.’ May sounded disappointed.

Margaret felt disappointed, too, when the list had been written up. None of the jobs appeared that she’d thought about that night when she’d sat up long after Elsie had fallen asleep.

There was a list for boys and a separate one for girls and, concentrate as she might, Margaret couldn’t see anything that excited her. At last she took a deep breath and put up her hand.

‘Margaret?’ Miss Edgars said.

‘I would like to help people to understand each other’s languages,’ Margaret said in a small voice.

Miss Edgars moved to stand near her, which made it easier to talk without being overheard. ‘That’s called an interpreter,’ she said. ‘A very important job during the war.’

Margaret nodded. ‘Then can I be one?’ she asked.

Miss Edgars’ face was suddenly very sad and tiny lines folded the skin around her eyes. ‘I’m afraid not, Margaret,’ she said softly. ‘Although we all admire you for how well you’ve learned English, you would have to study for quite a few more years to be an interpreter.’ She pointed to the board. ‘Please stick to the jobs on the list.’

Assistant in a florist’s shop. Assembly worker in a factory. Sewing machinist. Those were the three Margaret despondently chose and none of them sounded remotely interesting.

On the cold, icy walk home from school, Margaret told Elsie and Judith about what had happened earlier. Elsie, of course, asked many questions and Judith had some of her own, too.

‘Will you still live with us?’ Elsie asked.

‘I think all of those jobs will be quite local,’ Judith said quickly. ‘So of course she will.’

Margaret thought that was true, but she did wonder what else Mrs Kingfisher might be hiding from her.

‘Are you happy with your choices?’ Judith asked.

Margaret didn’t want to sound ungrateful, but nor did she want to pretend to her foster sister. ‘It will be okay,’ she said.

Judith threaded Margaret’s arm through hers and gave it a squeeze.

‘Will Judith take care of me at school?’ Elsie asked.

‘I’ll do my best,’ Judith replied. ‘But you hardly need anyone to look after you at school now. When Margaret or I try to find you in the playground you are always off with the other children. And that’s good.’

That answer satisfied Elsie — for the time being at least. And it was a true observation about the little girl, who had admirably fulfilled Margaret’s decree about them learning to fit in. Elsie had made friends, something that had eluded Margaret, although she was happy to be so close to Judith. Other children seemed to gravitate towards Elsie, especially after she lost all trace of her German accent. There was no surprise in that, though, because who could resist the tiny girl who was much smaller and more delicate-looking than other children her age, but whose character was as robust as a sergeant major’s — as long as she had one of the Kathys with her.

Margaret’s grasp of English had been described as excellent, but she’d heard Mrs Kingfisher comment that Elsie’s was impeccable, which made Margaret feel proud, relieved for Elsie’s safety and sad all at the same time. Germany hadn’t wanted them, so Margaret didn’t bother to keep a flame burning for that aspect of their background, except to mention lovely things like the Waldorf Ring and Lebkuchen. But every night she whispered something about their Jewish culture in Elsie’s ear, although more times than not Elsie didn’t understand or she fell asleep halfway through the conversation or she asked questions Margaret couldn’t answer. It seemed as though Elsie couldn’t remember and Margaret was unable to forget.

Passover, Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah had come and gone. Margaret explained everything she could remember about the ceremonies to Elsie, but that wasn’t enough. Since the moment Mrs Shulman had left the house, Mrs Kingfisher hadn’t mentioned her promise to help her and Elsie attend synagogue for the special festivities — just as she hadn’t said a word about her leaving school and going out to work. Anger boiled through Margaret and once again she felt as though she was being treated as no more than a number, like the one she had been given for the journey from Berlin to England.

Elsie skipped ahead, pirouetted on her toes and ran back towards Margaret and Judith. 'Be careful on the ice, Elsie,' Margaret said.

Elsie refused to worry. All she did was beam her disarming smile and carry on. 'I'm a ballerina,' she said.

'You will not dance for a very long time,' Margaret said, 'if you break your leg.'

'Do it, Judith,' Elsie demanded. 'The slippery ice helps you to spin.'

Judith laughed and turned on her toes.

'Margaret, your turn.'

But Margaret shook her head. Soon she'd be going out to work, so she was too grown up for things like that. Now there was no doubt about it, she had to leave behind any thoughts of continuing the limited childhood she'd had. And that meant having a face-to-face talk with Mrs Kingfisher as soon as possible.

Chapter 19

Saturday 14 December 1940

Judith

The air raids make us so tired. It's not just that we don't get a wink of sleep, it's everything else that goes along with them. The build-up is horrible. All afternoon I think about whether there will be another raid or not. Of course everyone hopes there won't be, but every night so far our hopes have been dashed. I get so worried about it that my stomach clenches as if a nutcracker is jammed around it and I have to keep going to the lav. By home time I can't think of anything else except all of us getting to the shelter safely if the warning starts up again. Then Daisy pops into my mind and I think I might cry as I imagine her pining for me. Is she safe? Does someone pet her and help her to keep calm? If I were given the chance to have a nap I'm sure I wouldn't be able to sleep, and Mum often has to get cross with me before I can eat my tea.

Then the warning sounds and we must somehow find the energy to turn off the lights and the gas, pick up our things, put on our coats and hats and walk as fast as possible to the shelter. Often there isn't much time before the bombs start to hit and, even if they're in the distance, the air seems to shake and the world shifts from beneath us. Once, in a moment of what I suppose was panic, I lost my bearings. It was very scary and I felt as if nothing was in my control.

It's not just me, I know that. It's everyone. We don't talk much about it but we don't need to. All the children at school look as if they're being haunted by ghosts. Mum's pale and her cheekbones are more honed than ever. I've noticed that Dad has developed a bit of a stoop and poor Miss Battleaxe has sacks like purple plums under her eyes. Hettie Jackson told me that her brother is away with the army and her grandmother, who she lives with, fell over on the way to the shelter and is quite poorly. Now she no longer seems to be quite the nickname I've given her.

Then the following morning, just as my eyelids refuse to stay open, we're expected to go to school and get on with it as though nothing untoward has happened. Really, it's all too much.

Now Mum has sent me up to bed to have a lie-down — at eleven in the morning on a Saturday — because she thinks I'm tearful and overtired. Well, I think she's horrid because she wouldn't listen when I told her I was crying because I miss Daisy.

'Daisy is fine,' Mum said. 'You know that. She's having the time of her life on the farm.'

'How do you know?' I answered back. 'Has she written a letter to you?'

'Judith!' Mum was shocked. 'That is not like you. Not at all. There is only one person you could have learned such cheek from, and I won't have it. Now, up to your room, Madam.'

So I suppose I might have been sent up here for being bold as well as very sad and tired. Sleep, though, is the furthest thing from my mind, so I shall use the time to catch up on my diary, something I don't like to do in the shelter as Mum might try to have a peek and I'd be done for.

I know the person Mum was referring to — Margaret, my very best friend in all the world after Daisy. I love Elsie so much, and who wouldn't? She is a little angel and so funny. If she says something to make everyone laugh, like 'Mmm, I like it,' when she talks about food, she does it over and over again. But she is only six and I can't talk to her the same way I can talk to Margaret. We share everything and I hope that doesn't change now that Margaret is about to leave school and go to work, although I think there's quite a lot different about her already.

One day last week on the way home from school, Margaret's face darkened. It's hard to explain, but when that happens her brown eyes look as if they're in the middle of a storm and her forehead furrows so deeply that her heavy eyebrows meet in the middle. These things usually happen when she is more worried than usual. She said that leaving school and going to work would be okay, but I think she is anxious about it all the same. I know I would be. Mum and Dad are always telling me that I will probably go on after I turn fourteen, and I'd like to — but sometimes I think I ought to get a job and contribute to the war effort. Mum and Dad would probably go mad if I suggested it, though. Margaret *ought* to stay on — she is very bright and capable and works hard at school, but she might not cope as well with the English needed for the harder studies. Besides, I suspect that Mum would like her at work so she can start earning her keep.

Anyway, when Mum came to the door to ask how our day had been, Margaret lost no time in asking if she could speak to Mum — alone. That made Mum's features darken, too. 'Go upstairs and change out of your uniforms, girls,' she'd said to me and Elsie. 'Margaret, follow me.' They went into Dad's study and closed the door.

Elsie made for the stairs, but I held back. 'Go on,' I said to her. 'I'll be up in a minute. I just have something to do first.' She hesitated for a moment, then nodded sagely and skipped up the stairs, and I tiptoed to the study door and pressed my ear to the keyhole.

As luck would have it, it wasn't long before Mum raised her voice. 'Just what are you accusing me of?' she asked.

'Of course I am not saying anything like that, Mrs Kingfisher.' Margaret's voice was confident if a little high-pitched.

'Well, that sounded like an accusation to me,' Mum said.

'Why did you not tell me about leaving school?' Margaret asked.

'Margaret.' Mum sounded as if she were struggling with her patience. 'Sometimes it seems to me that you do not understand how lucky you are to be here. It could have been you living or not, or merely existing, in Nazi Germany like so many other Jews— poor people.'

'I am very grateful, Mrs Kingfisher,' Margaret defended herself. 'I am simply asking to be kept informed about things that will have an effect on me or Elsie.'

But it was as if Mum hadn't heard — or perhaps she wasn't listening. 'You are also prone to getting above your station,' she went on. 'We have pledged to keep you in our care until you are sixteen or until Britain wins the war, whichever comes first. However, I would like to remind you that you are only here because Elsie needed you, but Elsie is not so dependent on you now, is she?'

I held my breath in the stunned silence that followed.

'Do you understand what I'm saying?' Mum said at last.

So quietly that I had to strain to hear, Margaret said, 'Perfectly, Mrs Kingfisher.'

I don't know how I stopped myself from barging in and asking Mum how she could say those things to Margaret. And what had she meant, that my beloved foster sister would be sent from the house on her sixteenth

birthday? If that happened, then I would go with her and we would take Elsie, too.

‘I will tell you what you need to know when you need to know it,’ Mum said. ‘And there will be many decisions about Elsie that will have nothing to do with you.’

‘Mrs Kingfisher,’ Margaret pleaded. ‘She is my sister and . . .’

‘That may be so, young lady, and you may be going out to work, but you are not an adult yet. I am, however, and Elsie has been put into my care.’

‘Yes, Mrs Kingfisher,’ Margaret said. She sounded exhausted.

‘Now go and change out of your uniform and bring down all the dirty laundry, please.’

Shock jolted through me and my mouth went dry. I knew unpleasantness had been bubbling away between Margaret and Mum for some time, even though I couldn’t put my finger on it. Margaret hinted about it now and again, but she’s much too concerned about keeping on Mum’s good side and appearing to be grateful for Elsie’s sake to do anything as tactless as speak out of turn. And as for Mum, well, this diary knows how determined she can be. Once she gets an idea in her head nothing can change her mind.

‘There is one more thing, Mrs Kingfisher.’

I could not believe my ears. Margaret was so brave.

Mum didn’t say a word of encouragement and I could imagine her standing with her arms crossed and her nostrils flared.

‘You told Mrs Shulman you would make enquiries about the nearest synagogue so we could attend Jewish celebrations, but we have missed quite a few.’

‘I’m afraid I haven’t been able to take that any further,’ Mum said. ‘Besides, Elsie seems to have forgotten about all that. When you are sixteen, you can do what you like, of course.’

My heart was pounding so hard I could hear it in my ears, and it wasn’t just because I was frightened about being caught in the act of eavesdropping. In fact, I almost wished Mum had opened the door and seen me so I could have had my say, too.

Suddenly there was movement behind the door, and I quickly darted towards the stairs, where I met Elsie coming down.

‘Where were you?’ she asked, balancing Kathy on the banister. ‘And why are you still in your uniform?’

That child never stops asking questions. It’s a wonder her teacher isn’t worn out.

I grabbed her hand, turned her around and pulled her back up the stairs with me. ‘I’m going to get changed, then we can have a look through a book together, okay?’ I said. I wanted to make Mum think we’d been occupied with an activity other than snooping.

All the time I was getting my play clothes ready, Elsie asked question after question. ‘Where is my sister?’ ‘Which book are we going to read?’ ‘Why are your hands shaking?’

But I had to think. I couldn’t decide whether to tell Margaret I’d overheard or wait to find out what she would tell me about her confrontation with Mum. In my mind I started a list of pros and cons, but I didn’t have time to finish before Margaret appeared in the bedroom looking hot and bothered.

‘Margaret,’ Elsie squealed. ‘Where have you been? I hope you didn’t get a biscuit from Mrs Frost without me and Judith.’

‘Of course not, my love.’ Margaret gathered Elsie in her arms. ‘I would never even think of it.’ And I believe that — Margaret would never be unkind to anyone, especially Elsie.

‘I am okay,’ Margaret said. ‘I will get ready now to help you with your homework. Gather your copybooks on the table and we will be down in a minute.’

Elsie started to protest, but we both insisted and she left reluctantly with Kathy snuggled close.

I looked at Margaret enquiringly, but she shook her head. ‘You heard, I am sure,’ she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

‘How do you know that?’

‘You are still in your uniform,’ she said.

‘Yes.’ I nodded, feeling rather ashamed.

‘I would have done the same,’ Margaret admitted. ‘So, there is nothing left to say. You know everything.’

‘That’s right, but if you have to leave, I promise that . . .’

Perhaps Mum was right. I’m so tired now that my pen keeps sliding off the edge of the page. I’m just going to have a little nap because who knows

what horrid things tonight has in store.

Chapter 20

Friday 20 December 1940

Elsie

Elsie was very surprised when Margaret's name was called out in assembly and the headmaster gave her a lovely book. He handed one to all the other boys and girls who were, he said in a little speech, leaving to go to work. All the children clapped, but Elsie did so until her hands were sore and she was rewarded with a special smile from Margaret as she made her way to her seat.

When they met at the gate after school, Elsie saw that most of the girls who had been given a book were crying quietly; the boys weren't, they looked happy and a bit too sure of themselves. There were tears in Margaret's eyes, too, which made Elsie feel very sad. 'Why are you crying, Margaret?' she asked. 'Do you need to hold Kathy?' She took her sock doll out of her pocket and made it pretend to kiss Margaret on her cheek.

'It is all right,' Margaret said. 'You keep Kathy, she needs you.'

'Are you crying because you don't like your book?' Elsie put her hand in Margaret's.

That assumption made Margaret laugh. 'No, little one. I love my book. Here, have a look.'

Two lovely girls, one with blonde hair and the other with brown — like her and Margaret — were standing on a sandy beach in their bare feet looking out to sea. Their pretty dresses seemed to be moving in the breeze, and behind them two smaller children were making a sandcastle. 'Stories for Girls,' Elsie read the title aloud. 'Will this help with your homework?' she asked.

Again, Margaret laughed, and Elsie felt proud to have got that reaction. But when Margaret answered, she sounded as if she might start to cry again. 'I will not have homework anymore,' she said.

'Never?'

'No, never.'

'Then why are you crying?' Elsie sounded confused.

Margaret sighed and thought for a moment. 'Because I like learning and I will miss it very much.'

Elsie swept her palm over the cover of the book, enjoying the bumpy texture and the gold-embossed title. She wondered how she would feel if she had to leave school, because she liked learning, too. Then there was skipping in the playground and the hot dinners — especially the Spam casserole and rice pudding. It would be difficult if she had to leave and go to work, as she was a small child, but Margaret looked a lot like a grown-up now. Instead of her clothes being straight up and down, Margaret's curved in and out like Mrs Kingfisher's, and sometimes she spent a very long time in the lavatory and came out hiding something in her hand that she quickly put on the fire to burn. She still had large hands and feet but as she'd grown taller they seemed to have diminished, and the way her ears poked through her plaits a little bit — as they'd always done — was as comforting to Elsie as rubbing Kathy on her face.

'You can open it,' Margaret said. 'There is an inscription inside.'

'What's an inscrip . . . ?'

'The writing from Miss Edgars. Can you read it?'

'To Margaret on leaving your friends at Monument Hill School,' Elsie read. 'December twentieth, 1940. That's nice.' She handed the book back to Margaret. But you won't be leaving me and Judith, will you?'

Margaret ran her fingers down Elsie's plaits and said no, she would never do that.

When they arrived home, they were surprised to see Mr Kingfisher waiting for them at the door. Mrs Kingfisher and Judith were always talking very proudly about how high up he was in something called the government, and that was why they never knew if and when he would pop up. That made it much more of a special occasion when he did. Judith threw herself into his arms and asked if he was going to stay at home for Christmas.

He blinked a few times and said, 'I'm afraid not. I have to work until the last minute.' He put his hand first on Elsie's head, then on Margaret's. 'You'll be finding out all about that soon, Margaret. So Mrs Kingfisher tells me.' He gave a rather sad smile to the older girl.

'But you're staying for tea?' Judith said.

'Yes,' Mr Kingfisher said. 'And for a little while tomorrow morning while we have a telephone installed.'

The three girls looked at each other with their mouths and eyes wide open.

‘A big red box like the one in the high street?’ Elsie asked.

‘No,’ Mr Kingfisher said, laughing out loud. ‘A small black one that people can ring me on to let me know I’m needed back in my office.’

Elsie couldn’t imagine what such a thing would look like, but she was looking forward to finding out and hearing it make a ringing sound. She knew Mr Kingfisher wasn’t the king or the prime minister — neither of them wore spectacles in the photos she’d seen on the front pages of newspapers — but she thought Mrs Kingfisher and Judith must be right and he really was rather important. Although it seemed as though here at home it was Mrs Kingfisher who was in charge of all of them, including Mr Kingfisher.

Elsie thought the house felt different that evening. School had broken up for Christmas, which was not many days away, and heady, spicy smells were beginning to waft through the house. Although lovely, their first Christmas in England had been confusing, and she had barely understood a thing that was going on. She’d been scared then and worried that she and Margaret would be separated. She remembered how frightening it had been not to be able to speak or understand English, and that had made her feel as if she were trapped and helpless again in that dark, stuffy cupboard. Last year had been so much fun, with the tree and decorations, gingerbread men and mince pies. There had been gifts, too and she wondered what she would get in her stocking in a few days’ time. The thought of an orange made her mouth water and she wished now she’d savoured the one from last year a bit more while she’d had it.

Now she knew everyone — Mr and Mrs Kingfisher, Judith, all the children in her class, the man in the shop, the teachers and the headmaster, the doctor, dentist and the lady in the post office. She could speak to them in English and they talked to her — all of them. She and Margaret had not been separated and, instead of one Kathy, she had two. There was nothing left to be scared about, was there? Nothing except the horrible bombs and planes that turned to fire and Margaret’s worried face.

Because Mr Kingfisher was at home, they had a special tea. Judith and Elsie sat on either side of him at the big table and Mrs Kingfisher and Margaret were opposite, side by side. When Mrs Frost had served them a

meat pie with mashed potatoes, parsnips and green beans, Mr Kingfisher smiled and said, 'Right, I want each of you to tell me one thing you learned at school today, starting with Elsie.'

It was always fun to play a new game and it showed them a new side to Mr Kingfisher, who had never seemed as interested in them as he did now. Perhaps he'd missed them and liked being at home.

Elsie thought hard. She'd learned a lot of things that day, but wanted to choose something that made everyone feel happy and proud, so it was hard to decide. 'I learned that if you mix blue and red together, you get purple.'

No one laughed or said a word, they just looked at each other. 'Well,' Mr Kingfisher eventually said. 'I wasn't expecting that. I thought you'd tell us about times tables or new vocabulary. But that's good. Yes, very good, isn't it, Helena?'

'Very creative, poppet,' Mrs Kingfisher said, pressing a green bean against the potatoes on her fork. 'Did you have an art lesson today?'

'No, drawing and painting,' Elsie said.

'That is art, Elsie,' Judith said.

Elsie took Kathy from her pocket and put the doll to her ear. 'Kathy says she knew that.' She nodded wisely.

That made everyone laugh and Elsie felt glad. She didn't want teatime to end.

'Judith?' Mr Kingfisher asked his daughter.

Having had time to think about it, Judith answered right away. 'I learned all the county towns in the British Isles.' She looked very proud of herself.

'Essex,' Mr Kingfisher fired at her.

'Chelmsford.' Judith didn't hesitate.

'Wiltshire.'

'Trowbridge.'

'Cumberland.' Mr Kingfisher grew louder with each county he called out.

'Carlisle,' Judith shouted triumphantly.

'That's enough excitement,' Mrs Kingfisher said. 'Don't let your tea get cold.'

Reluctantly, Mr Kingfisher and Judith turned their attention to their plates.

‘How about you, Helena,’ Mr Kingfisher said. ‘You must have learned something today.’

Elsie looked at Margaret, whose face didn’t betray enjoyment or displeasure, and wondered when it would be her turn. Under the table, she stretched out her foot to gently touch her sister’s leg.

‘Let me see,’ Mrs Kingfisher said. ‘I learned that green beans keep for a long time if you store them somewhere dry.’

‘But they get very stringy.’ Judith held up a nest of well-chewed fibres.

‘No need to be cheeky,’ Mrs Kingfisher said.

‘And you, Margaret?’ Mr Kingfisher looked across the table.

Elsie heard Margaret take in a deep breath. ‘I have learned that I will be working on the assembly line at the Sorbo Rubber Works.’

A few seconds’ silence passed, then Mr Kingfisher cleared his throat and said, ‘They make self-sealing aircraft fuel tanks for the RAF now, so you’ll be helping the war effort. That’s wonderful, Margaret.’

‘That is good,’ Margaret said. ‘I am very happy about that. But there is no point in concentrating on Henry the Eighth’s wives or the ten algebraic terms as they will not be any use to me there.’

Elsie quickly shovelled in the last of her tea, placed her cutlery over her plate and plugged her mouth with her thumb. She had a feeling that something was about to happen that would spoil the evening, and Judith must have thought the same because she looked very pale.

Mrs Kingfisher pursed her lips and looked at her husband with a strange expression that Elsie read as: I told you so. ‘You sound resentful, Margaret,’ she said in a controlled manner. ‘But what do you think you would have been doing in Germany right now had you not been rescued? Going on to university to study to be a doctor or a lawyer?’

Red crept up from Margaret’s collar and she looked mortified. ‘No,’ she stuttered. ‘I know that would not have happened. I am sorry. It is just that I —’

‘Or if we hadn’t taken you in? You would have gone to a hostel or camp where, believe me, you would have had nothing like the education or lifestyle you’ve had with us.’

‘Helena,’ Mr Kingfisher said firmly. ‘Remember what we talked about. Try not to be so hard on the girl.’

That was the very first time Elsie could remember Mr Kingfisher speaking up against Mrs Kingfisher. She felt her eyes widen and her muscles tighten. She looked at Margaret and Judith for reassurance but they looked as shocked as she felt. The whole evening was going the opposite way to how she imagined it would.

‘She is ungrateful.’ Mrs Kingfisher’s voice rose.

‘I don’t think that’s the case,’ Mr Kingfisher said. ‘In my opinion, she doesn’t fully comprehend.’

‘Then that’s the one and only thing she doesn’t understand.’ A flock of white spittle settled on Mrs Kingfisher’s lip.

Elsie tucked Kathy into her neck and thought she might start to scream. But instead of that, Margaret began to cry large, silent tears that fell off her chin and onto her folded hands. Elsie knew it was against the rules, but she jumped down from her chair and put her arms around her sister.

‘Are you unhappy about going to work, Margaret?’ Mr Kingfisher said.

‘No.’ Margaret wiped her hand across her face and put her arm around Elsie. ‘I am surprised, that is all. But Mrs Kingfisher is right, things would not have been better for me in Germany, I know that. They would have been much, much worse. I am very sorry, Mrs Kingfisher. I am truly grateful and not unhappy.’

‘Let’s try not to get into this situation again, shall we?’ Mrs Kingfisher said, although she wouldn’t look at Margaret.

At that moment, Elsie wanted to ask why Mrs Kingfisher was using the plural — something else she’d learned in school that day — when everyone knew she was referring to Margaret and no one else.

‘Now.’ Mrs Kingfisher sounded matter of fact again. ‘There is something for Henry to learn.’ She looked across at her husband. ‘He and I need to be ready by half past seven to greet the great and good of Woking, whom I have invited here for a few drinks.’

Mr Kingfisher groaned and put his head in his hands. ‘Helena, must we?’ He sounded as if he were in pain. ‘I was hoping for a quiet evening with my family.’

But Mrs Kingfisher ploughed on regardless. ‘The girls will be absolutely fine eating their pudding on their own. I’ll see you back down here shortly.’

With a cough and a couple of blinks, Mr Kingfisher stood up from the table. 'Have you finished, girls?' he asked.

'Yes, thank you,' each of them said.

'Then I'll get Mrs Frost to bring in the steamed pudding and custard.' But he didn't move right away. He looked at each of them in turn and kept his eyes trained on Margaret for quite a while. 'I wish I was at home more often,' he said. 'However, needs must.'

'It's all right, Dad,' Judith piped up, sounding a bit too cheerful. 'We understand that you have a top position in the government and Churchill needs you in London.'

Mr Kingfisher smiled. 'I'm sure the prime minister could manage admirably without me.' With that, he left them to it.

Elsie pulled Mrs Kingfisher's chair right up to Margaret's and sat as close to her as possible. She poured a spoon of watery custard over her dessert and then trickled some into Margaret's bowl because her sister didn't seem interested in doing it herself.

'I have spoiled the evening with Mr Kingfisher,' Margaret said, tears filling her eyes again. 'I am sorry.'

'It wasn't ruined,' Judith said quickly. 'I just don't know why Mum has to be so horrid sometimes.'

'Mrs Kingfisher is very kind,' Margaret said. 'We are lucky to have her. It is me. I have no idea what will be expected of me in the factory and I am a little bit worried. That is all.'

Elsie nodded. 'I would be, too,' she said. 'But besides you going to the factory instead of school, nothing will change, will it?'

'The factory will probably make me stay later than school, but then I will come straight home. Nothing will change, I will always be your sister and Judith will always be our best friend forever.'

That was exactly what Elsie wanted to hear. Then she said, 'Remember how frightened I was of school at first? Now I love it. And you will love your factory, too. I know it.'

'That is right, my little love.'

'Now,' Judith said, 'hurry up with your pud so we can go upstairs and play a game before bed.'

Elsie cleared her bowl, rubbed her stomach and gave her usual compliment, which made Judith and Margaret laugh. She and Judith ran for

the stairs, but Margaret walked behind them sedately. For some reason she couldn't explain, that unsettled Elsie again. Margaret had said nothing would change, but Elsie thought that many things already had and none of them could ever be reversed.

Chapter 21

Sunday 5 January 1941

Judith

Before we left for the shelter, Mum said that as soon as she took down the tree and decorations she was going to rearrange the bedrooms and put me and Elsie into one room together and give Margaret space on her own. I wouldn't have minded, but Elsie's eyes filmed with tears and Margaret's hands clawed at the sides of the chair she was sitting on.

Then there was a noise we hadn't heard for ages. The little angel opened her mouth and let out a wail to match the air-raid warning. 'No, Elsie.' Margaret wrapped her arms around her sister and put her hand over her mouth. 'You must not. Remember what we talked about? We cannot draw attention to ourselves.'

But Elsie found a way past Margaret's hand and the howling carried on. For the first time ever, I was glad Daisy wasn't here because her ears would have been damaged for the rest of her life.

'I'll handle this,' Mum said, putting her mending aside. 'Now then, Elsie.' Mum bobbed down beside her and tried to get her attention. 'Because Margaret is a young lady and going out to work, she needs some privacy.'

I could tell that Margaret did not like that explanation at all. Her face darkened and she shot Mum a look. I think Mum's explanation was wrong, too, because Margaret hadn't asked for privacy from Elsie or me — the whole thing had been Mum's idea. And Elsie was having none of it. All she did was carry on with her screaming.

'I'm afraid, Elsie, that I've made up my mind.' Mum stood and put her hands on her hips. 'Tomorrow when you get home from school, Mrs Frost and I will have moved the rooms around. For now, you are going to have to scream, although it is most unpleasant. I cannot give in to you because you have learned how to be loud. Blast,' she said abruptly. 'There's the real siren. Quickly, girls, to your stations.'

That had no effect on Elsie, but eventually I heard Margaret tell her sister that changing rooms wouldn't make much difference anyway because

we were in the shelter almost every night, all night. That quietened the little one, although she continued to snivel for quite a while.

We all had to settle down before our usual time as we had busy days the next day, but I begged Mum to let me finish my diary on the basis that once school started I would have to concentrate on my homework. She agreed with the help of Mrs Clarke's sherry and I am writing frantically in case she asks — or demands — to have a look.

So back to school tomorrow, worse luck. Although not for Margaret. Mum is walking to the factory with her early in the morning as she has to be ready to start at nine. She keeps saying she's okay about it, but I'm not sure she is. It must be a horrid prospect. Sometimes you can smell the factory for miles around, so I can't imagine how putrid it must be when you're there inside the place. More than that, though, I think she's worried about the unknown. It must be a case of 'here we go again' for her. I told her I would be thinking about her all the time tomorrow and I won't be happy until she's home with us at the end of the day. *Bless her*, is what Mrs Frost would say.

At least we had Christmas, even if it wasn't like any that had gone before. There was an unofficial truce on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day — which didn't stop the papers from calling it 'Blitzmas' — and Dad was home with us for that time, too, although the telephone rang for him a couple of times and he had to talk through it to someone for quite a while. I suppose then the Luftwaffe thought they had to make up for those two days off because, soon after, they bombed London so horribly that there was a firestorm like the Great Fire of London. (As well as snooping, I've taken to reading discarded newspapers.)

Most of our gifts this year were made of paper. In our stockings were spinning tops, a game of snakes and ladders, comics, annuals and a new diary for me with a little heart-shaped lock and tiny key dangling from it. Elsie and I were also given snowy white socks and Margaret received a large leather satchel. She looked a bit taken aback when she opened it but said very politely, 'Thank you, Mr and Mrs Kingfisher,' and she held it up for all of us to see.

'You're very welcome,' Mrs Kingfisher said. 'Now that you'll be going to work, we thought you might like a nice new bag to carry all your things in.'

‘It is very handsome,’ Margaret said, running her hand over the grain. ‘And very thoughtful.’

‘Now, Mr Kingfisher and I have another surprise for you, haven’t we, Henry?’

Dad looked confused and blinked in Mum’s direction.

‘We spoke about it a few times, including last night. Please tell the girls, I think they will be most excited.’

‘Ah, yes.’ Mr Kingfisher cleared his throat. ‘We think it would be lovely if Elsie and Margaret started to call us Mum and Dad. Or Auntie and Uncle. We would like that very much. What do you think, girls?’

Elsie put Kathy to her ear and pretended to listen intently to what the doll might be saying, if she could talk.

‘Oh,’ Dad said. ‘The same applies to Kathy, of course.’

Elsie smiled broadly and jiggled around on her chair. ‘Thank you, Mr Kingfisher, I would like that.’

‘Dad,’ Dad said, making everyone laugh. ‘Or Uncle Henry?’

Elsie looked at Margaret for guidance, but her older sister’s face didn’t give anything away, something she was getting very good at. Everyone waited for Elsie’s reply, and at last she shyly whispered, ‘Dad.’

‘How delightful,’ Mum said. ‘And what will you call me?’

‘Mum,’ Elsie said loudly, warming to the idea.

‘Come and give me a big hug, poppet.’ Mrs Kingfisher held out her arms and Elsie curled next to her with her thumb in her mouth.

‘Will it be the same for you, Margaret?’ Dad asked. ‘My word, I never thought I would have three children calling me Dad.’

I looked over at Mum, hoping she would give Margaret some words of encouragement, but she didn’t. She just cuddled closer to Elsie and looked as if she had everything she wanted in the whole world, so I stepped in. ‘Go on, Margaret,’ I said. ‘Then there will never be any doubt in people’s minds about us being sisters.’

‘Thank you, Mr and Mrs Kingfisher,’ Margaret said. ‘I am very grateful, but it is different for Elsie. She does not remember our mother and father, but I can very clearly picture our parents, so it would feel strange for me to call you Mum and Dad. I hope you understand, it is out of respect for them.’

Dad sat back in his chair and looked disappointed and thoughtful. Mum said she understood and didn't seem too bothered, although I did wonder if it hurt her deep down. I'm not sure I completely believe Margaret. She told me that her memories of her parents are blurry, but she can recall her grandmother quite well. Whether it is out of regard for her mother and father or not, I think she just cannot bring herself to call my parents Mum and Dad. Of course she has the right to do whatever she thinks is best for her, but I thought that, if she could force herself to follow Elsie's lead, it might help pave over this rift between her and Mum. I approached her about it later in ever such a nice way and all she said was, 'I am sorry, but I cannot. It is too difficult.' She started to check that everything was in order with her work clothes, so I left it at that.

The very best thing I got this year was a postcard from Daisy that I'm always going to keep with me. I could not believe it when it landed on the doormat. It was postmarked Gloucestershire, so I knew it was real and not one of Dad's silly tricks. *Dear Judith*, it said.

It is beautiful here on the farm. I can run around without a lead and there is always something nice to eat. Mrs Smith lets me sit on her lap in the evening while she reads and sometimes she laughs because I snore.

But I haven't forgotten you and I never will. I can't wait until we are together again, but until then I am safe and happy.

Lots of tail wags and soppy kisses from Daisy. X

It made me cry from happiness. I showed it to Elsie and Margaret and we all jumped up and down together. Mum said it was a very lovely thing for Mrs Smith to have done and I agree.

Talk about snoring! A terrible racket is going on right next to my ear. It's Mrs Clarke's mother, whose false teeth are loose in her mouth. I do wish we didn't have to sit next to them every time we're in the shelter, but I suppose at least it means Mum is busy with the sherry bottle.

My mother can read my thoughts, I'm sure of it. She just pulled back my cover and made a grab for my diary. 'You should have been asleep ages ago,' she said. 'Whatever are you writing in that book?'

Luckily, my reflexes are quicker than hers, and I shoved the diary under my pillow. 'I'll be two minutes,' I said.

'Yes, well,' she said, breathing alcohol fumes all over me. 'I'll be checking.'

So now I must lock the diary and hide the key in my sock. Then I should try to sleep. We're all going to look like zombies in the morning. But there is one more thing. If two sides in a war can decide to have a Christmas truce, wouldn't it be just as easy for them to make the decision to end the war once and for all? I will never understand grown-ups.

Chapter 22

Monday 6 January 1941

Margaret

It was such a bleak day to start work. But Margaret supposed the grey, drizzly morning, thick with the residue of bomb smoke, matched her mood.

Wearily, they tramped out of the shelter and made their way home. They avoided the thin layer of oily ice that had formed over puddles and the corner where a rope cordoned off a pile of bricks that had fallen from an outhouse.

Even though the fireplaces in the house were never lit overnight, it was so much colder when they came back every morning at dawn. The house was still and cheerless and it took a while for them to breathe life back into the rooms.

The first thing Mrs Kingfisher did was put on the kettle. ‘Mrs Frost will be here soon to set the fires, but in the meantime I’ll make us all a cup of tea,’ she said. ‘It will have to be a quick breakfast this morning. Toast with whatever there is in the cupboard.’

Margaret didn’t care what she had for breakfast, but she did wonder if there would be anything available for lunch at the factory — and how she would get it, as she didn’t have any money of her own. That was one of the questions she would put to Mrs Kingfisher.

Judith groaned and flung herself on the sofa. ‘Can we go back to bed for half an hour?’

‘Of course not, Judith, don’t be silly,’ Mrs Kingfisher said. ‘It’s time to get ready for school. And work.’

‘Quarter of an hour, then,’ Judith begged. ‘I’m so tired.’

‘We’re all tired,’ Mrs Kingfisher said, warming the pot with a splash of hot water. ‘And maybe tonight you won’t stay awake so late writing in your diary.’

Judith looked at Margaret and rolled her eyes dramatically. That made Elsie laugh, which in turn caused Mrs Kingfisher to stare at all of them. ‘Upstairs, girls, and get yourselves ready for your first day back. Judith, help Elsie, please.’

‘She doesn’t need much help now,’ Judith said.

‘I’m a big girl, Mum,’ Elsie said. The term for their foster mother was still a novelty to Elsie and she used it at every opportunity. This grated on Margaret a bit, but how could she possibly begrudge Elsie? She’d never had the chance to call anyone Mum or Mutti — as far as Margaret was aware.

She knew she should have encouraged Elsie to talk about what she might remember from the time before she had been taken to the orphanage. The shadow of a mother or the ghostly presence of a father or grandparents. Perhaps, as she’d wondered on their train journey, there had been sisters, brothers, aunts and uncles. A whole busy, noisy, chaotic house. Then again, there might have been no one at all from the minute she’d been born.

Elsie had asked her once, when they were tucked up together in bed, to tell her about their parents. *Their* parents. That had brought the enormity of her lie to sit heavily on her chest. Should Margaret have told her what little she knew about her own family and embellished the story? That seemed cruel and unnecessary and much more of a deliberate and calculated deception than how she had first blurted out the original untruth. So, she had mumbled something hazily and hoped Elsie would forget about it, which she seemed to have done.

‘I know that, Elsie,’ Mum was saying now. ‘But Judith can help with your plaits.’

‘Mum,’ Elsie protested. ‘My big sister always does my hair.’

‘Judith is your big sister, too,’ Mrs Kingfisher said in a sugary voice. ‘And I’d like to speak to Margaret alone for a few minutes.’

Margaret closed her eyes for a moment. *Now what was going to be said to her? Would she be told that, as well as not sleeping in the same room with Elsie or plaiting her hair in the mornings, she could not speak to the little one at all?* She gently felt under her eyes to where tiny, soft pockets had started to swell. But she wasn’t the only one; no one looked as they had done before the bombing started.

Mrs Kingfisher poured two cups of tea and handed one to Margaret. ‘Now,’ she said. ‘I think it only right that as you’re old enough to go to work, you have a few more grown-up responsibilities in the house.’

‘Yes, Mrs Kingfisher.’ Margaret tried not to sound dull and lethargic.

‘So every morning I would like you to make sure the coal scuttles are full and pile the breakfast things neatly in the kitchen ready to be washed up. Do you think you can do that?’

Margaret thought that in theory she could do that with her eyes closed. But it would mean she would have to juggle her routine if she was to have something to eat herself and leave for work on time. 'Of course, Mrs Kingfisher, but could I not sort out the coal the night before so I have more time in the morning?'

'That would be ideal. But when you get home there will be laundry to gather and tidying to do, so you probably won't have time.'

Tears threatened behind Margaret's eyes, but in that instant she knew she would never allow Mrs Kingfisher to see her cry again. Emboldened by that thought, she asked if Mrs Frost was going to stop coming to the house.

'Tut, tut,' tsked Mrs Kingfisher. 'It's such a shame your grasp of English won't allow you to carry on at school as you're a very sharp girl indeed. No, but it will give me the opportunity to get Mrs Frost to undertake chores that she rarely gets round to. Any more questions?' She looked at Margaret as if she were quite disappointed.

'Two more things please, Mrs Kingfisher. How will I get my dinner today at work?'

'There is some sort of staff canteen, I believe,' Mrs Kingfisher said. 'I will give you the money you need for this week.' She found her purse and handed over a couple of shillings, making sure not to touch Margaret's palm in the process. 'But after you get paid at the end of the week, you can use your own money to buy your food at work and any personal items you need. Shampoo and soap and so on. I will also expect you to give Henry and me a small amount for your keep.'

Margaret was sure her face betrayed disbelief. If she'd been hoping to see a film at the cinema or save for a brooch or treat Elsie to a sugary bun, that would never happen now.

Mrs Kingfisher took a sip of tea, then settled her cup back in its saucer. 'It's the British way,' she said. 'And the same will apply to Judith and Elsie when they leave school. Besides, I'm sure all the money you might have earned in Germany wouldn't have been yours to keep. What else did you want to say?'

'I will continue to do Elsie's plaits every morning.'

'But then you'll have to get up even earlier.' Mrs Kingfisher sounded as if she'd won a game of some sort.

Margaret shrugged. 'Then that is what I will do.'

‘Well, you’d better get a move on,’ Mrs Kingfisher said, but she didn’t turn her back quickly enough for Margaret to miss her flared nostrils.

Margaret took the stairs two at a time and managed, somehow, not to slam the door when she hurled herself into the bedroom. In the middle of Judith plaiting Elsie’s hair, both girls looked up and seemed to freeze, then Elsie flew into her arms and Judith asked what was wrong.

‘You’re very red in the face,’ Judith said. ‘What’s happened?’

‘It is okay,’ Margaret said. ‘Mrs Kingfisher wanted to tell me about new chores she wants me to do because I am no longer at school.’

‘What are they?’ Judith asked. ‘We’ll help you.’

Margaret shook her head. ‘I think Mrs Kingfisher would not like that. But look what a mess you have made of Elsie’s hair.’ She laughed out loud.

Judith bobbed around to look at Elsie from the front and she started to giggle, too. She nudged Elsie to get up and guided her to the mirror on the dressing table, where all three girls stared at the disastrous hairdo and then at each other. One plait was above Elsie’s ear and the other started at her chin. Stray strands — like the ones Margaret still pulled from her own braids when she could get away with it — poked out here and there. Giggles turned to tears of laughter and Margaret grabbed her side with one hand and Judith’s arm with the other. Weak and helpless, Judith fell onto the bed and Margaret and Elsie piled in around her. ‘Oh dear me,’ Margaret groaned, wiping her eyes as the laughter subsided. ‘My sisters.’

As quickly as the hilarity had started, it stopped. All three girls lay gazing at the ceiling. This was the first time Margaret had referred to Judith as their sister rather than their best friend and it felt right, as though it should have happened a long time ago.

Margaret turned her head and looked at each of the younger girls in turn, which made a few leftover giggles unfurl around the room. Then Elsie smoothed her hands over both sides of her hair and said, ‘Margaret?’

‘Do not worry, my love,’ Margaret said. ‘I am going to do your hair every morning. Now, we will start over again. Then I must get dressed and go back downstairs.’

The rest of the morning passed in a blur of crockery, cutlery and coal. They ate their toast, drank their tea, then said goodbye to each other at the end of the road, where they had to take different directions. Margaret held

on tight to both Judith and Elsie when they hugged. 'Have you got Kathy?' she asked Elsie.

Elsie rummaged in her pocket and brought out the bedraggled sock doll. 'And you know to get Judith if you need her? Although I am sure everything is going to be okay.'

Elsie nodded. 'See you this afternoon,' she said, with a catch to her voice.

'Remember, I will be a little bit later than you, but I will be there.'

'Yes, Margaret. I'll be waiting.'

They turned to wave to each other several times before the road curved and they were lost from each other's view.

* * *

Little was said between Margaret and Mrs Kingfisher during the remainder of the walk. Mrs Kingfisher asked if Margaret would be all right to walk home by herself and Margaret said she would be fine. Mrs Kingfisher said they were in good time and Margaret agreed. They passed houses with vegetables growing in the front gardens, two pubs, the church where they'd had that terrible scene three years ago, before joining a thickening crowd walking in the same direction. Then they were at the gates. Margaret looked up at the imposing building and her legs turned to mushy peas. How she wished she'd been given the florist's shop on the high street with its sweet, earthy smell and customers who came out smiling, colourful flowers in hand.

'We need to ask for a Mr Harridan,' Mrs Kingfisher said. 'Are you all right, Margaret? It wouldn't do to be ill on your first day.'

'I am not ill, Mrs Kingfisher,' she said, when what she longed to say was that she was overwhelmed and apprehensive and suddenly felt much younger and more fragile than the other workers swarming towards their workstations. But she couldn't. How she wished things had worked out differently and she had the same rapport with Mrs Kingfisher that Judith and Elsie had, but that moment had passed. Margaret glanced at her foster mother and, although she looked exactly the same as she'd always done, Margaret thought she didn't know her at all. And that sad conclusion worked both ways.

They were taken into an office where a man in a blue foreman's coat introduced himself as Mr Harridan, who was to be Margaret's supervisor. Another girl came in with her mother and both women were given documents to sign. Margaret sat with her back ramrod straight and tried hard not to feel anything — no resentment, bitterness, sadness and definitely no joy. But there was one feeling she could not quell and that was the thought that she was, once again, no more significant than a number — although this time she realised that she was the only one who could make something more of herself than that.

Then the other girl smiled at her shyly and Margaret managed to return the gesture.

'Margaret Bower meet Eileen Shaw,' Mr Harridan said. 'You will be seeing a lot of each other as you've both been apprenticed at the same time.'

'Hello, Margaret,' Eileen said. She smiled properly and Margaret saw that her two front teeth were crossed. Her clothes were exact copies of Margaret's — a black skirt, pale blouse, dark cardigan and sturdy black shoes. She was more petite than Margaret, which wasn't unusual, and her sandy-coloured hair was cut level with her chin.

'Hello, Eileen,' Margaret said. 'I am pleased to meet you.'

Eileen frowned when she heard Margaret's slight, lingering accent. That made Margaret's stomach flip. She didn't want any recurrence of the bullying by evacuees in the playground.

Without consulting the girls, the grown-ups began talking about hours, the canteen and rates of pay. Eileen leaned behind them to catch Margaret's eye and mimed scissors cutting her hair.

Adept at mime, Margaret found this made no sense, so she shrugged imperceptibly. Eileen pointed to Margaret and repeated the action. Did she mean Margaret would have to cut her hair? She wasn't ready to let her plaits go. Girls in Germany kept their long hair until they left school. That was when it hit her: she was at that stage of her life now.

'... it can be quite dangerous,' Mr Harridan was saying. 'That is why we insist.'

'Yes, I understand,' Mrs Kingfisher said. 'I didn't think because the circumstances — which I've told you about — are different. Plaits are very

important to girls in Germany. However, Margaret is in England now, so I'll cut it myself tonight.'

Margaret opened her mouth to protest, but Mrs Kingfisher shot her a look that said she had better not dare. The two mothers said goodbye and the girls followed Mr Harridan to be fitted with the equipment they would need. Machinery clanked in the background and a putrid chemical smell drifted towards them, mingled with a waft of boiled cauliflower. The rest of the day would be gruelling, Margaret thought, with procedures to learn and people to meet and work to get on with. And then, tonight, all there was to look forward to would be washing up, a haircut, a bedroom devoid of chats about the day and what it meant to be Jewish, followed by another night in the shelter. Now, more than ever, she determined to somehow make her own future and be in control of her own happiness. And she would take Elsie and Judith along with her.

Chapter 23

Tuesday 2 June 1941

Elsie

That horrible siren, which meant the bombers were coming to get them, had stopped — just like that. One night it was the same as it had been for months, the next it was so still it sent shivers up and down Elsie's spine.

'Why is there no warning?' she'd asked Margaret as she was tucked into bed.

'I do not know, my love,' Margaret answered. 'But I think the Luftwaffe might have tired themselves out and now they are having a rest.'

'Judith said they've gone to other places, so they can't be that worn out. Do you think they'll stay away from us for ever?'

'I hope so,' said Margaret, but she didn't sound sure.

'That's what me and Kathy want, too. We're fed up with having to go to the shelter. But I don't like it when it's so quiet. It makes my tummy jump around as if it's waiting for something bad to happen.'

Margaret was sitting on the edge of the bed. Her hair had grown a bit since it had been cut in line with the bottom of her ears and now it waved softly around her neck.

It had been quite a shock to see Mum hack away at it and Elsie had been surprised when Margaret sat with a rigid back in the hard chair, staring straight ahead as if she were not involved in what was happening to her. She didn't even cry. But Elsie did, and Judith begged Mum to stop. 'Don't you think that's short enough?' she asked.

'It's for safety,' Mum said. 'Mr Harridan told us there must be no chance of it getting caught up in the machinery, didn't he, Margaret?'

Margaret didn't make a move to answer.

'Margaret,' Mrs Kingfisher said. 'You did hear him, too, I'm sure you did. Surely I didn't make it up.'

'Yes, Mrs Kingfisher, I heard him,' Margaret answered in a blank voice.

'Besides,' Mum said, studying the back of Margaret's hair to make sure it was even. 'Plaits are for girls, not for young ladies, and that is the same here and in Germany. Also' — it sounded as if Mum were trying to

convince herself that she was doing the right thing — ‘it will stop Margaret once and for all from pulling out loose strands and twiddling them around her fingers. Well, I hope it does. Goodness knows I’ve tried every other tactic I can think of.’

When Mum had finished, ropes of dark, thick waves were spread out all over the floor, as if they’d been cut from the heads of one of the princesses in Elsie’s picture book of fairy tales. Mum tried a few times to pin up what was left of the hair, but it was too cropped for that. *Margaret looks nothing like my sister*, Elsie thought. She had to hold Kathy close when it popped into her head that she might never recognise her again. That filled her with terror.

Then Mum, hands on her hips, scrutinised Margaret from the front and she didn’t look very pleased with the outcome of her handiwork. That wasn’t surprising as the short hair wasn’t very nice at all, but when tears clouded Mum’s eyes Elsie felt very confused. Of course, it was lovely that Mum had been concerned for Margaret’s safety, but at least she could have taken Margaret to Pierre’s Hair Palace in the high street. It didn’t seem fair.

‘Oh dear,’ Mum said, trying to smooth what was left of Margaret’s hair over her sticking-out ears, which no longer had anywhere to hide. That made Margaret press her lips together in a straight line, the first indication she’d given that she was unhappy.

‘You’ll have to wear a couple of clips somehow, Margaret,’ Mum said. ‘Or these combs. You’re too old to go about with your hair unpinned, no matter how short it is.’

‘Yes, Mrs Kingfisher.’ Margaret held out her hand. ‘I will be able to manage them on my own, thank you.’ Without the help of a mirror, she deftly tucked the tip of each ear under a strand of hair before she caught up the sides in the combs. Without her ears protruding, she looked very different.

‘I didn’t think I liked your new hairstyle at all,’ Judith said. ‘But now I think it’s lovely. You look so pretty and grown-up. Don’t you think she does, Mum?’ Judith persisted.

‘Well, it certainly is a change,’ Mrs Kingfisher said. ‘Girls, it’s time to get your schoolbooks ready for the shelter should the warning sound. And Margaret, would you mind sweeping the mess into the bin?’ Then she

turned towards the front room and the sherry bottle, mumbling something that sounded like ‘never being able to win’.

Judith tried to lead Elsie away from the scene, but she lingered and tried to make sense of what was going on — although that would be hard. When they’d first arrived, Mum had used the word ‘girls’ to mean her and Margaret, then that had changed to include Judith and now it was back to two of them again — but this time it signified her and Judith. Why was Margaret being left out? She was working now and much more grown-up than she had been, but not that much more. She was still a girl, wasn’t she? And why did Margaret talk to Mum as if she were someone she hardly knew?

‘Lovely cuddles, little one,’ Margaret said. ‘Now, we must all do as Mrs Kingfisher asked. I will see you again in a few minutes.’

‘Come on, Elsie,’ Judith said, pulling on Elsie’s hand. ‘I’ll race you up the stairs.’

‘Do not be silly and hurt yourselves,’ Margaret called after them, sounding a little bit like a Fraulein who’d looked after her a long time ago in a very different place. She’d meant to ask Margaret about the woman, but they’d had to get ready for the shelter and it was forgotten, like so many other things.

Every once in a while, an image of that woman fleetingly passed through Elsie’s mind and, try as she might, she could not hold on to it. ‘Margaret,’ she’d asked one night. ‘Who looked after me and Kathy before you did?’ Elsie rubbed her sock doll on her face.

‘You had a Fraulein in your orphanage, and I had one in mine,’ Margaret said. ‘Mine was named Fraulein Thiess.’ Margaret smiled into the distance. ‘She was very kind. But you cannot remember what yours was called — or can you, now that you are a bit older?’

Elsie shook her head. ‘No, I can’t. And I can’t picture how she looked, either. Not very well, anyway. But sometimes when you tell me to be careful . . .’

‘And do you ever listen to me?’ Margaret tickled Elsie along her neck. ‘No, you do not.’

‘I don’t need to.’ Elsie sounded very sure of herself. ‘When you found me, you said I’d always be all right because you would take care of me. Do you remember?’

‘Of course I do, my love.’ Margaret’s voice cracked. ‘But my way of looking after you is telling you to look after yourself.’

‘I know.’ Elsie let the last word linger on an exhale until there wasn’t any air left in her lungs. Then she took a deep breath in and tossed Kathy into the air.

‘The bombers not appearing has made you restless,’ Margaret said. ‘Judith will be up in a minute and I will soon have to attend to my chores and get ready for work in the morning. Mrs Kingfisher said I could read to you for a little while, which book will it be?’

‘No, I want you to tell me a story instead.’

‘It will be a true story,’ Margaret said. ‘Is that okay?’

‘Yes,’ Elsie said. ‘And Kathy thinks so, too.’

‘We haven’t had a chance to talk about being Jewish since I moved into my own room, have we?’

Elsie’s shoulders sagged and the happiness she’d felt seemed to be sucked out of the room. But maybe this time the story would be interesting or exciting, so she tried to listen carefully.

‘Jewish people have special types of clothes for special occasions.’

This might be okay, Elsie thought. She liked clothes and was particularly pleased with a new kilt skirt Mum had bought her to wear to church on Sunday mornings. Judith had been given a dress to match, but Margaret didn’t get anything as she refused to go to services with the family and chose to stay at home instead and peel potatoes — something Elsie would have hated to do.

‘Boys and men wear a small cap called a kippah.’

Elsie was astounded and stopped twirling Kathy above her head. ‘Does it look like a kipper,’ she asked. ‘And what about the horrible smell?’

Margaret threw back her head and laughed out loud, something she didn’t do very often now that she went out to work. ‘Not a kipper like Mr Kingfisher sometimes eats,’ she said. ‘But a kippAH with an AH on the end, not an ER. It covers the crown of the head.’ She cupped her hand over the top of Elsie’s head to show her what she meant. ‘Do you understand?’

‘Yes,’ Elsie said, although she couldn’t help but imagine a smoked fish flapping about on Dad’s hair. It was very funny.

‘Then there’s a tallit, which is a prayer shawl with a fringe around it that is worn for morning prayer.’ Margaret stopped to think. ‘And

something white worn for holidays and weddings.'

'What is that one called?' Elsie asked.

'I cannot remember, my love,' Margaret said softly. 'And that makes me very sad.'

'Kathy says you mustn't be sad and that's what I think, too.'

'Sometimes it is okay to be sad.'

'Maybe,' Elsie said. 'But you are sad too often. Now, tell me a proper story and it will be nice for both of us. A story with a dragon and a princess, please.'

'It is late, but I will start a story and we can finish it tomorrow.'

'Once upon a time,' they chanted together, but that was as far as they got because Judith came in, schoolbooks in her arms. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'Mum says Elsie must go to sleep now and she wants you downstairs, Margaret.'

Elsie's mattress sprang up when Margaret stood and she thought it had been much cosier when the older girl's weight was keeping her feet and legs warm. 'Do you think there will be a raid again tonight?' Elsie asked.

'I do not know,' Margaret said in a tired voice. 'But if there is, I will be with you.' She pulled the covers over Elsie's shoulders and kissed her forehead. 'Goodnight, little one.'

Elsie turned away from her older sisters, plugged her thumb in her mouth and held Kathy close. She stopped fidgeting and let her heavy eyelids droop, but not before she heard Judith whisper to Margaret. 'I tried to help,' she said. 'I did a few dishes for you before Mum came in and told me that was your job.'

'It is all right, Judith,' Margaret said. 'You must not get told off on my account.'

There was a loud noise in the distance like something heavy falling and Elsie couldn't properly hear everything else that was exchanged between the two older girls. All she made out was Judith saying she had asked Mum why Margaret had to do so many chores in the house just because she'd finished school and went out to work.

'She said that was how it had been in her house when she and her siblings left school,' Judith said. 'It didn't do her any harm and taught her how to be an adult when the time came.'

Elsie wondered if that was all there was to being a grown-up — working — both inside and outside of the house. She hoped not, or else what was the point in coming to a different country, sitting through lessons at school, wearing pretty dresses and learning proper table manners? What she wanted to do was play, laugh and have fun — and for Margaret to do those things, too.

Chapter 24

Thursday 20 November 1941

Margaret

As the months went on, Margaret began to enjoy her job and there were times she felt almost glad that things had worked out the way they had. It wasn't being on the assembly line that she liked, but there were definitely advantages to being out of the house for hours every day.

The morning was bitterly cold, but the air was so clear it looked as though chimneys and trees had been cut out of a postcard and pasted onto the bright blue sky. Margaret breathed into her scarf and exhaled a cloud of steam right in front of her face. She loved the early morning walk now. Her chores were always completed in plenty of time; Elsie's hair was meticulously plaited and she made sure both younger girls had everything they needed for school. Then she would call out a goodbye to Mrs Kingfisher, who would barely look up from her tea and cigarette, before stepping eagerly into the fresh air.

Eileen was one of the reasons for her breezy attitude. She'd never thought it would be possible to have so much fun in a factory, but how wrong she'd been. Like Judith, Eileen was endlessly cheerful. Her vocabulary wasn't as good, nor was she as refined, but she made up for that by finding something to laugh about in every situation.

When Mr Harridan turned his back on them for any length of time, Eileen pulled such grotesque faces that Margaret felt sure they would both be done for. 'Do you not like him?' Margaret asked during one of their dinner breaks. 'I think he is very kind and helpful.'

'Yes, he is,' Eileen agreed. 'We could do a lot worse when it comes to a gaffer.'

'Then why,' Margaret said, putting salt on her mashed potatoes, 'do you gurn behind his back? You will get caught out one day.'

'Do you mean like this?' Eileen crossed her eyes and drew her top lip up towards her nose.

'Exactly that.' Margaret laughed. 'Poor Mr Harridan.'

Eileen shrugged. 'Oh, don't feel sorry for him,' she said. 'Every supervisor in every factory in England expects that to happen. It goes with

the job. Besides, it's very funny, don't you think?'

Margaret had to admit that it was. As was the way Eileen bent in two and held her back when they'd clocked off for the day or how she would spontaneously break into a rendition of 'Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy' that was so off-key it made Margaret cover her ears.

Another huge plus was the wages. She had thought she wouldn't have a penny to herself, but she was surprised when there was a bit left over for her pocket each week — quite a lot, when she compared it to never having had any money of her own. Of course she didn't tell Mrs Kingfisher that was the case; with a smile on her face, she put her housekeeping money on the mantelpiece every Friday evening and nothing more was said between them about it. That was not unusual, as they hardly exchanged a word that wasn't about cleaning or tidying or laundry and Margaret was quite all right with that situation; after all she had Elsie, Judith and Eileen to share her thoughts with. It had crossed her mind that if Mrs Kingfisher had been unfeeling enough towards her to sit down and plan her misery, that plan had backfired. Margaret, though, could not accept that as being the case. She preferred to think that it was circumstances that had dictated the fracture between them. The sudden way Margaret had been foisted on her family, Elsie's early reliance on her, her obvious unattractiveness in comparison to her little sister and her stubborn refusal to defer to her foster mother, especially when it came to responsibility for the angelic one. Sometimes, though, she found herself longing for an older woman to confide in or ask advice from. It would have been lovely if it could have been Mrs Kingfisher, or if Mrs Shulman had visited more than once or if Mr Harridan had been a Mrs, but there was no one and that made Margaret more determined than ever to stand strong and learn to rely on herself.

Eileen was also very knowledgeable about how to save pennies here and there. 'Don't buy an entire meal every dinner time,' she would whisper.

'But I get hungry,' Margaret protested. 'You must hear my stomach rumbling over the racket of the machinery.'

'Everyone can,' Eileen said. 'But once or twice a week, refuse a pudding and you'll soon see how the savings mount up. Then we can go out and have a proper piece of cake in a café. Or go to the cinema. That would be a real lark.'

Yes, it would, Margaret thought. But she couldn't see how she would be able to convince Mrs Kingfisher to let her go. There would be a grilling about how she'd accrued the money; who she was going with; how she'd manage to find the time around her chores. Inevitably, Mrs Kingfisher would ask her for more keep each week or pile more housework on her, and she didn't want either of those things to happen.

Then there was Elsie to think about. The little girl had adapted well to school without Margaret, but she still asked every day if her sister was going to come straight home from work in the evening, although Margaret was beginning to think that was nothing more than a habit that Elsie would soon break. Elsie had, when Margaret thought about it, done exactly what had been asked of her — she had blended in perfectly and never drawn attention to herself for being German, because no one would ever guess. Her accent was non-existent and her manners were impeccable; she did well at school; she had friends, she never refused pork, and with her blonde hair and blue eyes she looked every bit the English rose. So perhaps Margaret could worry a little less about her? Maybe once in a while, when Elsie and Judith were at their ballet class after school, Margaret could go out somewhere with Eileen after they'd finished for the day. It didn't have to be anywhere grand, but it would be lovely to accept Eileen's repeated invitation to visit her house for tea. That would be such a treat. And if she arrived home a bit later than usual, she would simply tell Mrs Kingfisher the truth. Where was the harm in going to a friend's house? Mrs Kingfisher often visited Mrs Clarke. As long as she caught up on her chores — which she would — there shouldn't be a problem.

'Look,' Eileen said that morning during their break. Margaret was eating a small rock cake and Eileen had chosen a sausage roll, which Margaret tried not to look at in case her stomach turned.

Eileen opened the pocket of her overalls and let Margaret peer into the depths.

'What am I looking for?' Margaret asked. 'Fluff or a ripped seam?'

'This.' Eileen's face was a round moon of wonder as she let the tip of a lipstick peek out of her pocket.

Margaret choked on the crumbs of her cake as they went down the wrong way. 'You are not supposed to have that here,' she said. 'Don't you

remember that no personal items are allowed on the shop floor? It should be in your locker.'

That wasn't the reaction Eileen was hoping for, because she rolled her eyes and looked a bit put out. 'Don't be so starchy,' she huffed. 'All the girls carry lipsticks around with them.'

To be fair to Eileen, quite a few did. That had always baffled her, because what was the point when most of them had to wear unappealing facemasks to stop the worst of the chemical fumes from hitting their lungs? It must have been for the benefit of any man who happened to be in sight just as they tore the masks away from their faces at the end of a shift. Or maybe it made them feel better about themselves, knowing that underneath the hideous coverings there was a smear of red reminding them that there was fun beyond the tedious jobs they fulfilled day in, day out and hope amidst the vast unknown of the war they were living through.

'Where did you get it from?' Margaret hissed. 'I thought you were saving your money so we could have an outing.'

'I found it,' Eileen said, all trace of her earlier hurt gone. 'On the locker room floor. There's quite a lot left in it.'

The rock cake fell from Margaret's hand. 'You stole it,' she whispered. 'And you must give it back.'

A violent blush rushed to Eileen's face and she looked appalled. 'I did not. I've never stolen a thing in my life. Mum would kill me and throw my body out on the street. I swear on my granny's grave, I found it.'

'Maybe you should hand it in,' Margaret said. 'To Mr Harridan. Then there cannot be any misunderstanding.'

Eileen's face dropped and she looked down at her pocket. She must have known that was the right thing to do, but whether she would do it or not was a different matter.

'Bloody buzzer,' Eileen said as a shrill noise signalled the end of break. 'When are you coming to my house for tea?' she asked, all smiles and crooked teeth again. 'Mum keeps asking.' She grabbed Margaret's arm as they walked down the stairs to the factory floor. 'Then we could try on that lipstick in my room.'

So Eileen wasn't going to give the golden bullet back. That made Margaret's stomach lurch; she could sense disaster waiting to happen. Despite that realisation, she couldn't turn down the offer of a few hours of

fun at her friend's house — something she'd never experienced before — and she let herself be pulled along in the wake of Eileen's excitement.

The following evening, they stood in front of a mottled mirror in Eileen's bedroom and passed the beautiful stub of lipstick back and forth between them. It felt warm and creamy on Margaret's lips when she smacked them together and the reflection that gawped back at her was almost sophisticated.

'Oooh, you should have your name in lights and your arse in tights,' Eileen said. 'Nobody would ever notice your ears when you're wearing that.'

Margaret dissolved into giggles at the backhanded compliment, and she pointed to where a tiny lump of red clung to one of Eileen's crooked teeth.

'None of us are perfect,' Eileen said.

They turned this way and that so they could study themselves from every angle. 'When my apprenticeship is finished, I think I might grow out my hair a bit and put it up every day like the older girls,' Margaret said. 'That would be much better.'

'I was thinking the same thing myself,' Eileen agreed. She reached behind her bed and drew the blackouts with much less precision than Margaret was used to. The entire household was less organised than the Kingfishers' and seemed to thrive on chaos, shouting and laughter. Eileen's older brother was away with the army, her younger sister was in her last year at school, her father worked on the roads and her mother moved things from one place to another — a pile of clean laundry to the sideboard to make way for dirty clothes, the sister's schoolbooks from the table so it could be set for dinner, mending from a chair to allow someone to sit down. Margaret had been glad to retreat to the relative calm of Eileen's room.

They hunted through the narrow wardrobe, pulling out items and talking about how they could be altered to clothes worthy of their upcoming nights out. 'You could take off the buttons from this dress and replace them with the sparkly ones from this rather tired-looking cardigan,' Margaret said.

'Good idea,' Eileen said, holding the dress in front of her. 'And with this one, we could—' She whirled around to see her mum standing at the bedroom door.

‘Girls,’ Mrs Shaw said. ‘Tea will be on the table in five minutes, or thereabouts.’ A coil of greying hair had escaped its pins and was hanging loose over her shoulder. Mrs Kingfisher would have had a fit if she’d seen that. ‘What’s that on your lips?’ She stepped into the room and peered at them.

Quickly, Eileen wiped her mouth on the back of her hand and Margaret, without thinking, did the same.

‘Lipstick,’ Mrs Shaw said in her thin, high-pitched voice. ‘I don’t think so. You know you’re not allowed that until you’re eighteen, young lady,’ she rounded on her daughter. ‘Where did it come from?’

Eileen rattled off the same story she’d given to Margaret, but her mother would not believe her. She made a point of saying that their family might be a lot of things, but they weren’t thieves. It was as if they’d been accused of all sorts of wrongdoing in the past that they needed to defend themselves against now.

‘It could not have been you, Eileen,’ she said. ‘You would not have stolen it. Or found it and not handed it in. It must have been her.’ She pointed a long, gnarled finger towards Margaret.

‘It was lost, Mum,’ Eileen sobbed. ‘All I did was pick it up. I promise.’

‘You’re sticking up for your mate and God knows why, she’s German after all.’

With that, Mrs Shaw threw Margaret’s coat towards her and frogmarched her home. ‘I should never have let my daughter fraternise with the likes of you,’ she said. ‘But truth be told, I felt sorry for you. Never again, you Krauts are all the same. And to think I wasted my rations on a nice bit of steak and kidney for your tea. Well, I’ve learned my lesson. That’s the end of your friendship with my Eileen and I shall be telling Mr Harridan to make sure she stays away from you at work and all.’

After a few minutes, Mrs Shaw’s tirade was drowned out by Margaret’s own deafening thoughts. How would she get Mrs Kingfisher to believe the truth? Would she be banished from the house? And if she was allowed to stay, she’d never be given an opportunity to dance or watch a film or do anything other than more and more chores. And what would Elsie and Judith think of her if Mrs Kingfisher was able to convince them that she was a thief?

The house loomed into view much too soon and Margaret wished she could run, liked she'd wanted to years ago when she'd been taken from the orphanage to the Kindertransport.

'I'd like to slap your smug Jewish face,' Eileen's mum mumbled as she rang the bell. Heat coursed through Margaret as she felt the imaginary sting of the older woman's palm on her cheek. She looked around, expecting to find broken glass on the ground.

When the door opened, Margaret stared into Mr Kingfisher's astonished face. 'Whatever is the matter?' he asked.

'Ask her,' Eileen's mum spat out. Then she turned on her heels and marched off.

Chapter 25

Thursday 3 September 1942

Judith

Things have been so horrid for Margaret — and for all of us — since last winter when Eileen's mum accused her of stealing a silly little lipstick. Mum would not believe Margaret's side of the story and, although Dad said she should give Margaret the benefit of the doubt, he is hardly ever here to enforce his opinion. I believe every word Margaret said, as when has she ever been proven to be a liar? 'Never' is the answer to that. Besides, she is so forthright that if she had stolen it, or found it and refused to hand it in, she would have come right out and said that. Instead, she'd said, 'Mrs Kingfisher, why would I steal it? I have enough money to buy my own make-up if I want to.'

'Oh, have you now?' Mum narrowed her eyes and flared her nostrils. 'Prove it, then.'

Margaret ran upstairs and came back with quite a few coins that she thrust under Mum's nose.

'And where did you steal those from?' was Mum's only response.

I could almost see the life being squeezed out of Margaret. Elsie, who was sitting next to me, looked as if she might be sick all over poor Kathy. In her distress, she cried out in forbidden German. 'Meine Schwester would not steal anything from anyone. Tell them, Margaret.'

'Mr and Mrs Kingfisher,' Margaret said. 'I have been saving whatever is left over from my wages each week to go to the cinema or take the girls for a treat.' Tears clouded her eyes.

'In that case, I think we should expect more housekeeping,' Mum said, reaching towards Margaret's palm. 'Don't you agree, Henry?'

But Dad closed Margaret's sweaty fingers around her money. 'You keep this, Margaret,' he said. 'You must have some money of your own. Perhaps, Helena,' — he turned to his wife — 'if you left her with more for herself, she wouldn't be tempted to take things.'

'I did not take it,' Margaret insisted. 'I am telling the truth.'

'Well,' Dad said diplomatically. 'You said it was Eileen and she says it was you, which means someone is lying. Whichever way round it is, I agree

with Mrs Shaw that you two shouldn't carry on your friendship. You're obviously not good for one another. And one more thing, Margaret. We expect better from you than this, do you understand?'

'Yes, Mr Kingfisher.' Margaret lowered her eyes and looked defeated.

'Now' — he eyed his wife — 'let's not hear another word about it.'

We did, though. Elsie and I had a lot of questions, which Margaret seemed happy to answer, and her story never once digressed from the original.

If things had been chilly between Margaret and Mum before that, they've been a sheet of ice since. Work and chores, work and chores and more work and chores — that's all Margaret does every day. Eileen was moved to the other side of the factory and Margaret doesn't talk about any other friends she's made in her place. I think she lives for the times she can be with me and Elsie. But today I hope things will change. They should do, anyway. Today is Margaret's sixteenth birthday and I didn't think she would be receiving much. Just a card from me and Elsie and a gingerbread sponge cake that we helped Mrs Frost to bake. But, Dad is home and I overheard him talking to Mum so I know there's about to be a surprise for Margaret — although I don't know what it is. Oh, there's the door; Margaret's back so I'll lock up my diary and run downstairs. I don't want to miss a thing.

* * *

I hadn't told Elsie a word, so when Mum called her in from the swing and we sat together on the sofa waiting to see what would unfold, she looked anxious with apprehension.

'That can wait, Margaret,' Dad called into the kitchen. 'Please come and join us, we have something to tell you.'

Margaret came through the door wiping her hands on her pinny. She stood and looked from one person to the other and the colour drained from her face. 'I am sixteen,' she said in a very small voice. There was only one thing she could be thinking about, and that was Mum's threat to send her to a hostel on her birthday.

'Happy birthday,' Dad said, followed by a murmur from Mum and a shout of hurrah from me and Elsie.

'Thank you.' Margaret looked confused and frightened.

‘This is for you,’ Dad said. He held out a small package wrapped in tissue paper. ‘From me and Helena.’

It was all very mysterious and exciting.

‘What is it?’ Elsie squealed. ‘And Mum, will there be icing on the cake me and Judith made?’

‘Judith and I made,’ Mum corrected the grammar. ‘Wait and see. First let Margaret open her gift.’

‘It won’t explode.’ Dad laughed. ‘Tear into it’.

Carefully, Margaret pulled off the paper to reveal a brand-new gold-coloured tube of lipstick, which slipped from her hands to the carpet. I don’t know who was most surprised — me or Elsie or Margaret.

A hush came over the room, then Dad rushed to pick up the bullet and place it back in Margaret’s hands.

‘I do not understand,’ she said.

‘Sit down next to your sisters and Helena will explain,’ Dad said. He poured a sherry for himself and handed another to his wife.

There wasn’t a hair out of place on Mum’s head. She sat up as straight as a plank of wood and her hands were steady, but still she looked ashamed. ‘I was in the greengrocer’s a couple of days ago,’ she started. ‘And the woman in front of me was telling her friend about a girl named Eileen who had been sacked from Sorbo for theft.’

Margaret gasped and put her hand over her mouth.

‘Apparently, Mr Harridan had been watching and waiting for quite a while. Eventually, they opened her locker in front of her and there were numerous pieces of make-up she’d stolen from other women.’

Margaret sank back on the cushions and tears fell down her face. Elsie and I both hugged her until she felt she could speak. ‘Is she . . . was she . . . taken to the police?’ she asked.

‘I’ve made enquiries,’ Mr Kingfisher said. ‘And I’m afraid so. She will be up in front of the magistrates soon.’

‘Poor Eileen.’ Margaret shook her head ‘And I feel very sorry for Mrs Shaw, who was so proud that no one in their family was a thief.’

‘We’re proud to be able to say the same thing.’ Mr Kingfisher stood and placed his hand on Margaret’s head. ‘And I will apologise first. We are so terribly sorry for doubting you. Can you forgive us?’

Margaret nodded slowly, as if she was in a daze.

‘Helena.’ Mr Kingfisher looked at his wife.

For the first time in years, Mum faced Margaret with a steady gaze. ‘I made a huge mistake,’ she said. ‘I can’t tell you how sorry I am.’

For an awful minute I thought Margaret was going to keel over. But she managed to say, ‘Of course, Mr and Mrs Kingfisher. Thank you for being so gracious.’

‘Can we see your lipstick now?’ Elsie said. ‘I want to try it on.’

Margaret turned the mechanism and a perfectly untouched cylinder of muted red lipstick made itself known. Elsie and I oohed and aahed and asked Margaret to put some on. ‘No,’ she said. ‘I want to keep it like new for a little while.’

‘Perhaps until you go to the cinema?’ Mum said. ‘Or to a café. Mr Kingfisher and I think you should do something like that at least once a fortnight. Would that make you happy? It would us.’

As if she were still in shock, Margaret said that yes, it would.

Then Dad said there were two more surprises. ‘Margaret, you are banned from going into the kitchen while Mrs Frost is putting the finishing touches on the cake.’

‘Yum.’ Elsie patted her stomach. ‘Icing. I like it.’

‘Yes, I know.’ Dad laughed. ‘Don’t we all. And the other thing is . . .’ He rubbed his hands together and could not stop his smile from broadening across his face. ‘. . . for Judith. Well for all of you, but mainly Judith. He turned to me. ‘Who’s your best friend?’

‘Margaret.’ I threw my arm around my foster sister’s shoulder.

‘No.’ Dad shook his head.

I furrowed my forehead and said, ‘Elsie?’

‘Again, not correct,’ Dad said.

I couldn’t think who he was referring to.

‘You haven’t forgotten your little ball of fur already, have you?’

Daisy. My best friend in all the world. But why was Dad talking about her now? Especially on such a wonderful day. A lump formed in my throat as I imagined my dog shaking herself after the rain and lying on the end of my bed.

‘Would you like to see her again?’ Dad asked softly.

‘We’re going to Gloucestershire!’ I shouted. ‘Are Margaret and Elsie coming with us?’

‘Sadly not,’ Dad said. ‘We’re only going as far as Kings Cross.’

‘Oh,’ I sounded as deflated as I felt. ‘Why?’

‘To meet Mrs Smith’s uncle who is coming to London on business and using the opportunity to hand Daisy back so you can bring her home where she belongs.’

Elsie cheered, but Margaret looked as wrung out and bewildered as I felt. ‘I can’t believe it,’ I whispered.

‘Nor can I,’ Margaret said, and we melted into each other’s arms.

War is all around us and we are somehow living through it. Eight days ago, a five-hundred-pound bomb was dropped on Bristol. Forty-five people were killed and fifty-six were injured. It must have been horrid. Every time I try to go to sleep since then, I get jittery because I can’t stop thinking that the same might happen here in Woking. I know that what I’m going to write next might sound wicked, but even with all of that, today has been one of the best days of my life so far.

Chapter 26

Friday 16 April 1943

Elsie

No matter how old she became with each passing year, Elsie remained the youngest in the family and was treated as such. Most of the time she didn't mind. It was lovely to be coddled and made a fuss of and have people say she was adorable. But sometimes it was most irksome, especially when important things were kept from her that, if given the chance, she could easily understand.

When she mentioned it to Judith, her foster sister looked at Margaret, who lifted her eyebrows and nodded. Then she checked behind her to make sure no one was coming their way and said it was about time Elsie accompanied them when they were snooping. 'Margaret doesn't eavesdrop much anymore as she's a young lady now.' Judith snubbed her nose with her fingers. 'So I could use a new partner in crime.'

Mimicking Mum, Elsie put her hands on her hips and flared her nostrils, hoping she looked disgruntled. 'See? I didn't even know about you snooping.'

'Really?' Judith said. 'You're being silly. I'm sure you did.' She nudged Daisy in among them and buried her face in the dog's fur. 'Daisy smells of spring and fresh air.'

For a moment they all tickled behind Daisy's silky ears and ran their hands over her tail and kissed the tip of her nose. 'You're never leaving us again, my girl,' Judith said, releasing the creature to shake herself from head to paws.

'You probably knew that Daisy was coming home way before I did,' Elsie complained.

'That was a complete surprise,' Judith said.

Elsie pursed her lips.

'Sometimes I wonder if Mum and Dad know I snoop and let me find out about the things they want me to know.'

'Probably,' said Margaret. 'But other times I do not think they have any idea we are listening.'

‘I did hear them talking about Margaret getting a big birthday surprise beforehand, but only just. And certainly not with enough time to let her know what was to come.’

‘To let *Margaret* know, but not *me*,’ Elsie huffed.

‘Oh, Elsie,’ Margaret said. ‘If you want to be treated like an adult, you must behave like one.’ There was no doubt about it, Margaret was a real grown-up now. There was a smudge of red on her lips, the hair that grazed her shoulders was pinned back and, while Judith and Elsie sat with their legs crossed, Margaret elegantly positioned hers to the side, her knees chastely pressed together.

It had been a long, cold winter with not much happening to cheer them on. Christmas was lovely, but much more austere than it had been, and Dad, who was home for two days, had been stuck to the telephone receiver for a good deal of that time.

Now, the weather had turned and everything seemed better and lighter in the warmth of the lengthening days. Elsie meandered to the swing and jumped up onto the wooden seat. Gently pumping her legs back and forth, one minute she was staring at the grass, the next at the fluffy clouds skimming the pale blue sky. She had no desire to go faster or higher. All she wanted to do was swing at that same height and speed. The soft breeze lazily caught her plaits and ruffled the hem of her dress, and from the kitchen there was the low hum of someone talking on the wireless. She closed her eyes to let all those good sensations overwhelm her. There was nothing extraordinary about any of it, but for some reason or another she thought she would never forget this day. It was as if the whole world was involved in a pact to make her happy.

There was one thing that had made the winter bearable and that was Mum and Margaret being friends again. Elsie hadn’t quite understood what had made them dislike each other in the first place and, although she’d asked a lot of questions, neither Margaret nor Judith had answered her with reasonable explanations. It could have been something to do with the way Margaret insisted on taking care of her when Mum wanted to do that herself. Maybe it had been because Margaret wouldn’t go to church or eat pork and because she tried hard to stay Jewish. Then again, perhaps it was the way Margaret held herself aloof, as Mum had called it, no matter how many chores she had to do or how much money she’d had to hand over. Or

because Margaret insisted on calling Mum and Dad Mr and Mrs Kingfisher. It sometimes seemed as if Mum had wanted to make her cry, but she never came close — and that had seemed to irritate Mum even more.

Whatever it had been, it was over now. Margaret still did chores and gave a bit of her wages to Mum, but she had more time and money to spend on herself now. Elsie had never seen them cuddle or act overjoyed to see each other, but they smiled and talked and strolled to the shops together and everyone seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

‘Shall we make a start, Elsie?’ Judith called to her.

‘Count me out,’ Margaret said, standing and brushing down her skirt. ‘I have my work clothes to get ready for tomorrow.’

‘What are we starting?’ Elsie asked.

‘Come on quickly.’ Judith cupped her ears and pretended to be listening. ‘I heard the telephone ring, so we might catch Mum’s end of the conversation.’

They held hands and tiptoed across the garden, which was great fun. Daisy followed behind, but they left her to it when she stopped to sniff around a tree.

When they were right next to the sitting room windows, Judith whispered, ‘Quiet, that’s the most important thing to remember.’

Elsie put a finger on her mouth and nodded.

‘This way,’ Judith said, leading them through the French doors and into the house. ‘We don’t want to go through the kitchen where Mrs Frost will give us away by chatting in a loud voice. That’s another thing you must do — think strategically.’

‘Think how?’ Elsie furrowed her brow.

‘Think about the whole picture. You know, what you want the outcome to be and what might happen if you do one thing and not the other.’

Elsie rooted around in her pocket and gripped on tight to Kathy. She was beginning to wish she hadn’t agreed to be Judith’s apprentice and had opted instead to stay outside on the swing, thinking about nothing. ‘Kathy doesn’t understand,’ she said. ‘And neither do I.’

‘Never mind about Kathy just now,’ Judith said. ‘Put her back in your pocket and stick close to me.’

Elsie didn’t think they needed to tiptoe in such a theatrical manner — standing on the balls of their feet and raising their knees high with each

step. But she knew about Judith's love of the dramatic and went along with it. When they reached the closed door of Dad's study, Judith pushed her hair behind her ear and leaned into the door jamb. Pointing her finger, she gestured for Elsie to do the same against the keyhole. At first, all she was aware of was a rush of cold air to her ear and the dreaded knowledge that she was up to something she shouldn't be.

Then, as if she'd turned the tuning knob on the wireless, she could hear Mum loud and clear.

'Are you sure it will be all right, Henry? Just let me go over the details once again. You've been able to get hold of four tickets to see the matinee performance of *It's Time to Dance* at the Lyric Theatre on Saturday twenty-fourth of April.'

Judith grabbed Elsie's arm and shook it hard. Silently, with her hand over her mouth, she was bouncing up and down with excitement. Elsie followed suit, but quickly put her ear back to her listening post.

'And you're sure the seats are together? You know I would fret if we were to be separated. I feel nervous enough about taking the girls to London, although I do agree that it will do us all good. Yes, yes, I know. It will be. What with Judith and Elsie's ballet lessons, too.'

'London,' Elsie mouthed to Judith. Her stomach flipped. The only time she'd been to the capital was when she and Margaret had arrived at Liverpool Street station, the war — and Mrs Kingfisher — having stopped any outings to shows and shops and museums since then.

'I'm sorry you couldn't get a ticket for yourself,' Mum carried on. 'But let's face it, Henry, it wouldn't really be your cup of tea.' Her laugh sounded like a tinkle and Elsie imagined Dad, on the other end of the line, chuckling with her. 'But if you meet us afterwards for dinner, that would be lovely. And you'll leave the tickets at the box office? That's a good plan. Well, I don't suppose I'll see you before then. Oh, and I'm not going to tell the girls until we're walking towards the theatre. I cannot wait to see their faces.'

Judith and Elsie stared at each other as if they were rehearsing for that moment. Their eyes were wide, their mouths agape and they both jiggled around soundlessly on the floorboards. Then Mum said goodbye and they heard the click of the receiver. Judith dragged Elsie away and they were halfway up the stairs before Mum opened the study door.

‘Margaret, guess what?’ Judith said as both girls launched themselves through their sister’s bedroom door.

Margaret looked up from mending a tear in her uniform sleeve. ‘Let me think,’ she said. ‘You have been spying and you have heard something exciting.’

‘How did you know that?’ Elsie said.

Margaret laughed. ‘Because that is what you were talking about when I left you. Come on then, what is it? Mr Kingfisher is coming home or there will be custard tart for tea.’

‘No, neither of those. Wait until you hear. Elsie, I’ll let you have the honour. Tell her.’

For a moment, Elsie didn’t know what to say as she wasn’t quite sure of the details, so she settled on saying, ‘London,’ and nothing else.

‘What about the rest?’ Judith moved Margaret’s sewing box aside and sat down next to her.

‘Your go,’ Elsie said.

Judith lowered her voice to a whisper. ‘We’re going to see a show in the West End and then have dinner with Dad.’

Margaret looked as though she’d been hit by something that left her frozen. ‘When?’ she asked. ‘I will probably be at work.’

‘It’s on a Saturday,’ Judith said. She clutched Margaret’s hands and squeezed them between her own. ‘In a week’s time.’

Margaret put her hand on her chest and repeated what she’d been told. ‘I am bubbling inside,’ she said. ‘We are so lucky, are we not, Elsie?’

Elsie nodded, but she wanted to know more about it.

Margaret had never experienced a live stage show either, but she seemed to have a good idea of what it might entail, so she and Judith did their best to describe the details to her. ‘It’s hard to imagine,’ Judith said, resting on Margaret’s pillow. ‘But it sounds wonderful, like a fairy tale. I can’t wait.’

‘But there is still a war going on, my love.’ Margaret’s face darkened. ‘So you must hold my hand all the time we are in London. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, Margaret,’ Elsie said in a dispirited voice. Like those few minutes on the swing earlier, she didn’t want this moment to end, so she steered the

conversation a different way. 'And I have decided to take both Kathys with me, one in each pocket.'

Margaret smiled at her and said, 'I am sure they will like that.'

* * *

School dragged the following week and twice her teacher had to remind Elsie to pay attention to her lessons. She longed to tell someone about the upcoming outing, but knew that if she did the news would most probably get right back to Mum. Instead, she contented herself with counting off the days and knowing that soon she would be able to share the news of the outing they'd had with anyone she chose. There might even be a programme to pass around.

With one more day left at school before the weekend, Elsie was vaguely aware of a commotion in the house while she slept. She tossed about in her bed and each time she surfaced from sleep she thought it might be building works in the distance or Mum talking to Mrs Clarke.

In the morning, though, she was stunned to find Dad sitting by the fire, wrapped in a blanket. His leg lay inert on a stool, bandaged to his knee. Mum laid a tray of tea and toast on his lap, and he grimaced when he tried to adjust his sitting position.

'What's the matter, Dad?' Fear gripped Elsie's stomach and made it lurch.

'I'm all right, my little girl,' Dad said. 'It's just a scratch. I told Margaret all about it before she left for work, but now we'll wait for Judith. Is she with you?'

Elsie looked around and there was her foster sister, who dropped her schoolbooks and ran to her father.

'Careful, my pet,' Dad said.

'What happened to you? Was it a bomb?'

'In a roundabout way,' Dad said. 'I twisted my ankle on the edge of a pothole and went over like a skittle. I haven't broken anything, but I will have to rest so I can heal as quickly as possible.'

'I've always been worried about you being in London,' Judith said. 'It's too dangerous.'

'Or I'm too clumsy.' Dad smiled. 'Besides, I have a job to do. Elsie, can I have a hug from you, too? It will make me feel much better.'

Elsie wasn't sure. She liked it better when Dad was his usual, robust self. Having him dependent on them made her think that the world was topsy-turvy again, like it had been in that airless closet. When she put her arms around his neck, she felt tears dampen her face.

Elsie took Kathy from her pocket and tucked her next to Dad. 'My own private nurse,' he said cheerfully.

'School, girls,' Mum said softly. 'Tomorrow's Saturday and you can keep Dad company all day long.'

Judith caught Elsie's eye and shook her head in one tiny motion. The theatre trip that had sounded so like a fairy tale would be nothing more than that.

If school had lagged during the past week, it almost came to a standstill that day. Elsie could not concentrate and spent most of the time thinking about how many different ways the loathsome war was having an impact on her life. Too many — and she was no more than nine years old.

Chapter 27

Friday 28 May 1943

Margaret

Despite having been cleared at home of all charges relating to the theft of the red lipstick, Margaret felt as if she'd already been burned once and didn't want to get too close to the flames of another friendship again.

Two sisters at the factory noticed that she buried her face in a newspaper or book during most dinner breaks, and they asked if she'd like to join their reading group. 'It's all girls around our age,' the one named Anne said. 'And we read loads of different books, then we talk about them while having a cup of tea and a bun.'

'This time we're talking about *The Clue in the Jewel Box*,' said Robina, the other sister. 'It's a Nancy Drew mystery. Have you read any?'

'I have,' Margaret answered. 'And I like them very much.'

As usual, the girls looked momentarily suspicious when they heard the trace of a German accent in Margaret's voice.

But polite and undeterred, Anne said, 'Well then, our group might be just right for you.'

Margaret was tempted. She imagined a cosy circle in a café or sitting room, making friends, improving her English; then she remembered Eileen's house and Mrs Shaw's rage, and couldn't bear the anxiety she felt sure would overwhelm her. Besides, the very language she hoped to improve might also hold her back. The others might think her dull and uninteresting if she sat through the whole meeting unable to say a word. 'Thank you very much,' she said eventually. 'But I have two sisters of my own I have to help after work and at the weekends.'

Anne and Robina mumbled something about being sorry that she wouldn't be able to join in, but Margaret could tell they were secretly relieved. They didn't ask again and did nothing more than nod vaguely in her direction when they saw her.

Now though, as well as Elsie and Judith, she had Mrs Kingfisher and for that she was very grateful. She didn't have the bond with her that Elsie had but, nevertheless, things were much easier than they had been and Mrs Kingfisher made a huge effort to ensure Margaret knew she was cared for.

Whether Margaret could accept that entirely and without question was a dilemma she battled with. If the episode with Eileen had stung her, what had happened with Mrs Kingfisher left her feeling as though she'd been attacked by an entire nest of wasps.

Rearranging furniture, or sitting together mending stockings, or Mrs Kingfisher trusting her to answer the telephone helped her to feel warmer towards her foster mother. And she loved shopping with Mrs Kingfisher. Not only for the occasional trinket that was bought for her, but because she always asked Margaret's opinion, and they would have lunch out together like a proper mother and daughter.

She reminded herself that there had been no further threats about her having to leave the house and fend for herself. But somehow the relief that brought felt precarious — as if something could happen any day to change Mrs Kingfisher's mind. When she thought about it, she knew her unease was to do with the secret she had been keeping for so long about her and Elsie not being biological sisters. There was more and more talk about an Allied victory — would that bring about discovery and downfall? She imagined Mrs Shulman turning up again with proof that Margaret was a liar and a sham. Triumph would be written all over Mrs Kingfisher's face. She would throw Margaret into the street and slam the door in her face. How she wished everything could stay as it was now. But that was a contemptible thought, as it meant the whole world would be punished just to keep her safe.

When Margaret's apprenticeship came to an end, she received a small increase in pay, which she shared with Mr and Mrs Kingfisher, and thought she might like to buy a marcasite bracelet from her share to celebrate. She'd admired the sparkling, eye-catching jewellery on so many other young women that she longed for a necklace or brooch or bangle of her own. And when she'd found out that the jewellery, made from iron ore chippings, was inexpensive and she could afford a piece, she'd been thrilled.

'Perhaps,' she said at the dinner table, 'I will take the train to London and have a look in a few shops.' Even as she said the words, her stomach churned with excitement and trepidation. But she also felt proud that she could do that — and with money she had earned herself.

Elsie's and Judith's eyes widened, then they both looked at Mrs Kingfisher for her reaction. A forkful of chopped ham, powdered egg and

potato pie stopped short of her mouth. She shook her head. 'I know you're closer to seventeen than sixteen, Margaret,' she said. 'But please don't go to London. I will be too worried about you.'

Margaret felt the blood rush to her face. No adult had ever said anything like that to her before.

But before she could reply, Judith said, 'Mum, there's nothing like the bombing there used to be in London. You know that Churchill's lifted the ban on church bells because he thinks the threat of a Jerry invasion has passed, don't you? Please, Mum, let Margaret go, and let us go with her, too.'

'Kathy wants to go to London,' Elsie piped up. 'And so do I. I'll hold hands with Margaret the whole way there and back, I promise.'

Mrs Kingfisher laughed. 'I don't think Margaret would get a lovely day out looking for a bracelet with you two hanging around her.'

Margaret looked at the girls and thought she would take them anywhere they wanted to go and she would forgo bracelets, lipsticks, books or gingerbread to do so. They were both her main occupation, source of interest, friendship and hope for the future. But while Judith remained steadfast, Elsie was drawing away from her. Not consciously, but there were small instances that were ripping their relationship asunder at the seams. She tracked each change with sadness along with an understanding that this was the way it should be.

The little one still waited for her to get home from work, but ran off as soon as she'd given her a cursory hug. Margaret helped her with her homework, although it was Judith or Mr Kingfisher she turned to more often than not. She rushed to pick her up from her ballet lessons — only to have her skip ahead hand in hand with one of her friends. Elsie refused to go to sleep without a story from Margaret or have her hair plaited by anyone else, but when Margaret tried to tell her about their Jewish background Elsie either begged her to stop or dropped off to sleep, so Margaret no longer bothered her with them. The little angel was English now, with an English accent, an English sister and parents and an English way of life. On Elsie's side at least, they now had a proper sisterly relationship; gone was the intensity and overwhelming dependency their situation had dictated. Elsie could, if she had to, survive very well without Margaret and, no matter how empty it made Margaret feel, she didn't think

she should interfere with that. The bigger question she asked herself was: could she exist and thrive without Elsie?

Margaret shifted her gaze from the girls to Mrs Kingfisher, whose dinner was growing cold on her plate.

‘The only way you younger girls will be going to London is if we were all to go together,’ Mrs Kingfisher said. ‘I don’t like the idea of one of you being there on your own. Anything could happen. Think about Dad’s leg, and he’s a grown man. I know I can’t really stop you, Margaret, but I’d rather you didn’t go. Perhaps soon, if the situation continues to improve, but not yet.’

Margaret had never thought she would hear Mrs Kingfisher pleading with her about anything, let alone that something was causing her anxiety about Margaret’s safety. She felt that to go against her foster mother’s wishes would be like giving her a slap across the face. ‘I think Mrs Kingfisher is right,’ she said. ‘It would be foolish of me to go to London at this time just for a silly bracelet. I will have a look in Woking.’

Mrs Kingfisher closed her eyes for a moment and breathed in deeply. But Judith and Elsie both booed. ‘Cluck, cluck, cluck,’ Elsie chanted.

‘Whatever does that mean?’ Margaret asked.

‘Chicken,’ Judith said. ‘The children at school make that noise if someone dares not do something.’

‘Like what?’ Mrs Kingfisher asked.

Judith shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Perhaps eat cold gravy or stand on one leg for the whole of break time.’

‘My word, how ridiculous,’ Mrs Kingfisher said.

‘Brian Saunders dared me to run off with Maisie’s spectacles and when I said that was unkind, he did the chicken noises to me,’ Elsie said.

‘Why didn’t you tell me after school?’ Margaret said. ‘I would have sorted it out for you.’

‘It was okay,’ Elsie said, using her pie to mop up the last of her peas. ‘I rubbed my tummy and said, “Mmm, chicken, I like it.” That made him laugh and run away.’

‘Well done, my little poppet,’ Mrs Kingfisher said. ‘We’re proud of you, aren’t we, Margaret?’

And Margaret was, but it was another tear in the stitching that had held them together so closely.

‘As a compromise,’ Mrs Kingfisher continued, ‘how about if I take you to Kingston-upon-Thames on Saturday? There are some lovely shops there. I’m sure you would find a bracelet you like.’

‘That is very kind of you, Mrs Kingfisher,’ Margaret said. ‘And that evening, if I have your permission, I could take Judith and Elsie to see *Old Mother Riley Detective* at the Gaumont? I have heard it is very funny. Perhaps I can buy all of us a bag of chips, too.’

‘Oh, the girls won’t like that at all.’ Mrs Kingfisher shook her head, looking very solemn.

Margaret, Judith and Elsie sat completely still in the stunned silence. *What have I done, Margaret thought frantically, to make Mrs Kingfisher turn on me again?*

Then Mrs Kingfisher laughed and Margaret was struck by how much she looked as she had when they’d first met — just before the war started. These few years had aged her.

‘Your faces were a picture, girls,’ Mrs Kingfisher said. ‘I’m only joking. Of course you can go, I think it’s a lovely idea.’

* * *

On Saturday evening, Margaret sat between Judith and Elsie as they all stared at the screen in the Gaumont. They’d had a lovely, warming bag of chips and fish offcuts and Margaret could feel the last of the grease and salt on Elsie’s hand when she slipped it in hers.

The trip to Kingston had been a success and a beautiful, twinkling bracelet hung from her left wrist. From time to time the shifting light caught the sparkles and she was distracted from the Pathé News reel for a few moments. There was something about a King Boris the Second — or was it the Third — of Bulgaria that wasn’t very riveting. Then the newsreader went on to say that this king had told the Foreign Minister in Germany that he would not turn over twenty-five thousand Jews to German control, even though Bulgaria was part of the Axis. After that, the reel moved on to the RAF raids on Dortmund. But Margaret felt stunned. The King of Bulgaria sounded like a very noble and courageous man. Who knew what series of events might have led her and Elsie to be two of those Jews — or two who faced a worse fate — if they hadn’t been put onto the Kindertransport. She gazed at the bracelet again and knew that it would always remind her of

how it could have been her and Elsie, but that inexplicably they had escaped.

‘Margaret,’ Elsie whispered. ‘Didn’t we used to be Jewish?’

Margaret’s heart sank. ‘We still are, my little love,’ she said.

‘I think you are, but I’m not now. I eat pork and go to church. Why don’t you do that, too? So the horrid Nazi people don’t get you?’

Thankfully, the feature film started, so she didn’t have to answer Elsie’s question, but if she had she would have said something about not being able to join Elsie in turning her back on Judaism. She had to remain as true as she possibly could, even if that meant the fabric of their relationship being rent further apart.

Chapter 28

Wednesday 7th June 1944

Judith

Up until yesterday, the most exciting thing to have happened was Margaret being kissed by that boy Mick she'd had her eye on for a while. It didn't turn out very well and I felt terribly sorry for her, but as I said, at least she's had her first kiss and doesn't have to practise with her pillow any longer. We've both been doing that and it's made us laugh until we cried, but from what she told me it's nothing like the real thing.

He'd asked her to go for a walk with him after work and she said he put his arm around her waist and pulled her close. 'When I smiled up at him, I knew,' she said. 'He nudged me under the shelter of a tree and put his mouth on mine.'

'Oh,' I said. 'How romantic. What was it like?'

'Lovely,' Margaret replied. 'Until I tasted some of his dinner.'

That made me laugh out loud. 'What had he eaten?'

Margaret unpinned her hair and brushed it. It's gorgeous now and falls just below her shoulders. She gives it one hundred brushes a day and I'm going to start doing the same.

She shook her head. 'It was not anything I had ever tasted before, but I remembered that pig had been on the menu in the canteen. I could not help it, I pulled away and started to heave.'

'Oh no,' I said, my hands flying to my mouth. 'What did he do?'

'He stepped back and looked horrified. And insulted.' Margaret mimed his reaction. 'I am sorry,' I said. 'I have never tasted pork and I am not allowed to because—'

He put up his hands as if I was training a gun on him. "I knew you were German, but are you a Jew, too?"

'What difference does that make?' I said, feeling outraged and very protective of my sister.

'A lot of difference to some people,' Margaret said. 'Because he walked backwards mumbling, "I can't, my family wouldn't . . ." He turned and couldn't run away fast enough.'

Tears floated in Margaret's eyes and I gave her a big hug. 'Forget him,' I said. 'He's not worth it.' That's something I'd heard in a film and I thought it was very apt for the situation.

'That is probably true.' Margaret sighed. She suddenly looked small and pitiful, but her eyes darkened. 'Why must I give my entire story to anyone who shows the least bit of interest in me? And why does everyone dislike Jews so much?'

'It's not everyone,' I said fiercely. 'Just . . . ignorant people. It won't matter to anyone who really cares. And a lot of people will think it makes you even more alluring, if that's possible.'

She smiled then and said thank you, but she still looked sad.

Then yesterday there was something much more dramatic to think about. John Snagge announced it on the BBC and I can't get his words out of my head. 'D-Day has come,' he said. Then he went on to explain what that meant and the three of us girls and Mum jumped about for absolute joy. The Allies have landed in France! It hardly seems believable. All those servicemen are so brave. I wouldn't say no to a kiss from one of them. I'm sure they wouldn't have bits of sausage stuck between their teeth and if they did, I wouldn't care.

Mum gave Mrs Frost the rest of the day off to celebrate with Mr Frost, so she made a tea of potato and carrot pancakes and a prune flan. Mrs Clarke came to have sherry and when she left Mum said she wanted to tell us a secret, but we had to promise never to repeat it to anyone else. I think she'd had one sherry too many, but of course we all promised. For once, we could learn something important without having to eavesdrop. 'Your father' — Mum lifted her chin — 'had a lot to do with making D-Day happen.'

We all breathed in sharply and looked at one another. 'Dad?' I said.

'Yes, Dad.' Mum nodded in an exaggerated way. 'He's been working on it for months and that's one of the reasons he's been away so often. We should all be very proud of him.'

'I am,' Elsie said. 'So is Kathy.' The sock doll agreed vigorously around Elsie's hand. That made all of us laugh.

Mum put on the wireless and we gathered around to listen to the news again. Then she tuned in to a music programme and we danced around the sitting room together. When I looked at Mum she was smiling, another glass of sherry slopping around the sides of the glass she balanced in her

hand, and Elsie was beaming as she pirouetted with Kathy. I knew my face was lit up, too. But every time I glanced at Margaret I thought she was only pretending to be elated as she twirled around, because her features were scrunched with worry.

When we got to bed, much later than usual, sleep was beyond me. So I crept into Margaret's room and asked if I could snuggle up to her for a little while. 'My tummy is too full of butterflies to sleep,' I said. 'Elsie went straight off, but you probably feel the same as me.'

Margaret lay on her back with her hands on top of the blankets and let out the longest sigh I've ever heard. 'Yes,' she said. 'Of course I do.'

'But there's something wrong, isn't there? I hope it's not still that Mick.'

Margaret snorted. 'No,' she said. 'Although what happened made me think about people's attitudes and what my life will be like.'

That made me stop in my tracks, because whenever I thought about the course of my life I imagined it full of good things. No matter how long I stay on at school or what career I choose or whether I marry or not, I've never doubted that it would all be wonderful — if a bomb doesn't get me first — which isn't very likely now, thanks to Dad.

'But . . .' I hesitated. 'It must be better than it would have been?'

'Yes, definitely,' Margaret said. 'And I am so grateful. But the end of the war will bring problems of its own.'

I opened my mouth to reply, but Margaret said there was work and school in the morning so we must go to sleep. She turned towards the wall and for a few minutes I lay close to her back and listened to the in and out of her breathing. Then I tucked her in snugly and went back to my own room, where I tossed and turned and thought about everything that had happened that day. When I relived Mum telling us about Dad's part in D-Day, pride once again surged through me, but that was immediately replaced by anger at Mum. She should not have told us about Dad's involvement and, to be honest, Dad probably shouldn't have shared the information with Mum. I doubted Dad had told anyone else, but who had Mum gossiped to? Mrs Clarke, who would think nothing of telling her mother, who would tell the woman behind her in the queue at the baker's, who would spill the beans to her daughter and on and on.

In a huff I tore a sheet of paper from my schoolbook, got out my coloured pencils and drew a copy of the Careless Talk Costs Lives poster. The one with two women gossiping on a bus and people sitting behind them listening. Underneath I wrote: You Never Know Who's Listening. Then I tiptoed down the hallway and slipped it under Mum's bedroom door. After that I was able to settle down.

This morning Mum looked a bit dishevelled. She couldn't eat any breakfast but drank endless cups of tea. She didn't say a word about my message to her. The only indication that she'd read it was when she looked down quickly as our eyes met. It would be reasonable to say there was a trace of shame on her face. Hopefully, my picture has done the trick.

Chapter 29

Tuesday 13th June 1944

Judith

Well, turns out I was wrong. I've looked back to check and I wrote on the 7th of June that it was highly unlikely that a bomb would get me now. But today an evil piece of mechanism called the V-1 fell on Bow in the East End. It destroyed a railway bridge and so many houses that two hundred people are now homeless. Six poor people were killed and thirty more were injured. In the newspaper Margaret brought home it was called a buzz bomb, and in Mum's it was named a doodlebug because it makes a loud, whirring noise that suddenly stops before the horrid thing falls to earth. Just a week ago we seemed so close to the end of the war and now this awful setback. Margaret was right when she said the end would bring problems of its own. There are new difficulties to be faced at every stage. There will probably have to be another evacuation from London and nights in the shelter and perhaps church bells will be banned again — who knows.

Everyone seems to be very scared. I was younger during the Blitz and the nightly bombing seemed to be more of an inconvenience than a threat. Now that I'm older and understand more, I feel very frightened too — I want my wonderful life.

Chapter 30

Monday 7 May 1945

Elsie

It was always exciting when school was stopped in the middle of a lesson and the children were ushered into the hall for a special assembly. Initially, Elsie would examine her conscience for any involvement she might have had in a situation that was cause for the headmaster's ire. But each time she quickly came to the conclusion that she had nothing to worry about and then she would let her imagination run riot.

Once, the theme had been thanksgiving for victory in Stalingrad. Another time the assembly was called to give the children instructions about what to do if they heard a V-1 or V-2 overhead — run to the nearest overhang, fall to the ground and cover their heads with anything available. A number of months ago the teachers let them have it because some of the children had been defacing books. Elsie loved books, so that made her very angry. She had to dig around in her pocket and hold on tight to Kathy to stop herself from opening her mouth and screaming out loud. If she'd had a cane, she would have whacked the horrible children who'd dared to do such a thing.

She was now almost as old as Margaret had been when they'd travelled to England on the Kindertransport. She could barely remember their hasty departure from Berlin or what had led up to it, although she had vivid flashes of a stifling cupboard, glass covering the ground, shouts from the streets, grabbing Kathy, and Margaret pulling her onto her lap, telling her they were sisters and they had found each other. She didn't know how or why Margaret had taken responsibility for her during that time. If faced with the same situation now, she didn't think she could manage it. She hadn't been brought up in hardship and deprivation, as Margaret had. Rationing was difficult, as were other restrictions caused by the war, but from what she understood they were nothing in comparison to what Margaret — and she, for a short time — had lived through in their orphanages in Germany.

That realisation had started to form itself in her mind about a year or so ago, and with it a sense of shame. Not for circumstances that were beyond

her control, but because she felt she should be making more of her good fortune. Maybe she was outgrowing the hours spent daydreaming on the swing or dancing her way through every walk home from school. It was still important that she try to make everyone laugh, and the thought of discarding Kathy — although Mum had suggested it — filled her with horror.

But now she was interested in so much more. In everything — newspapers, the wireless, any book she could get her hands on, science, music, art. She knew she would, like Judith, stay on at school when she turned fourteen, and if she had her way that would extend to well beyond.

Exactly one week ago, the children had trooped into an extraordinary assembly to be told that Hitler was dead. The barely believable news had been met with a wall of silence that cracked after a few moments to tumultuous applause and catcalls and shouts of ‘hurrah’. He’d killed himself. ‘And so he should,’ one of the boys bellowed.

They were allowed to celebrate, but not for long. ‘It’s not over yet,’ the headmaster said, trying to quieten them down.

‘But it soon will be,’ another lad shouted.

‘Let’s save our partying for then,’ the headmaster said as he signalled for them to return to their lessons.

Now he stood on the stage in front of them as they filed in and his grave face gave nothing away. The teachers sat in a row behind him and Elsie studied their faces to see if she could discern anything from the twitching of their mouths or the blinking of their eyes. They stared ahead, watching their individual classes for any signs of messing about, but then Miss Knox seemed as if she couldn’t help herself and for a split second the corners of her mouth turned up in a soft grin. Elsie knew then it would be good news.

‘Boys and girls,’ the headmaster said, rubbing his palms together. ‘I have something to share with you.’

The shuffling and sniffing stopped and the children glued their gazes to the front.

‘In the early hours of the morning, the unconditional surrender of the German Third Reich was signed and . . . and . . .’

Was that a catch in the headmaster’s voice? Tears in his eyes that he had to blink away — and were his hands quivering ever so slightly? Elsie

was so unprepared for this display of emotion, she felt as though she might start to cry, too.

‘. . . as soon as those papers come into effect the war will be . . . over.’ He seemed to be in a trance. Then he brought himself round and, to their utter amazement, he took his secretary by the hand and waltzed with her across the stage.

With that, children and adults alike erupted. It seemed as if they had all gone mad. They danced and sang and cheered at the tops of their voices. Judith found her and they held hands, leaned back and spun around so vigorously that when they stopped the room carried on whirling for ages. Some of the taller children formed a guard of honour and everyone ran through it, laughing breathlessly. June nudged Elsie and pointed to where Mr Harris and Miss Knox were kissing behind a half-closed curtain. They giggled and watched for a few minutes, until Mr Harris moved on to Miss Lyle, which was outlandish but very funny.

At last the headmaster clapped his hands and demanded complete silence. Everyone groaned at the thought of going back to class and trying to settle down to numbers or writing or geography. But he surprised them again. ‘Quietly please, collect your things and you may be dismissed. But’ — he held up his hand — ‘you must return tomorrow because, all being well, we will have some treats in store for you.’

Another roar went up, followed by children being anything but quiet in their rush to get out and see what marvellous celebrations might be happening on the streets and in their homes.

As they headed for their road, she and Judith held hands and sang a few verses of ‘Don’t Fence Me In’. ‘I can’t wait to tell Margaret about Mr Harris,’ Elsie said.

‘Yes,’ Judith agreed, sounding outraged. ‘She won’t believe it. What a cad. Kissing all the teachers one after the other.’

‘Well, I suppose it is a special day. Margaret might get a kiss herself at the factory.’

Elsie knew about Margaret’s kiss with Mick and she hoped that, if another one came her way, it wouldn’t involve the leftover taste of pork.

‘I expect Mrs Clarke will be drinking sherry with Mum,’ Elsie said. ‘And I bet there’ll be a special tea tonight.’

When they turned into their street, they started to run towards the house. 'Margaret will probably have been let off early, too,' Elsie said. She longed to see her sister's face, as flushed and excited as her own.

But when Mum answered the door, she looked most surprised to see them. The wireless was blaring out from the front room. She took a deep drag of her cigarette and said, 'Why aren't you still at school? It's not that time already, is it?'

'Mum,' Judith said. 'The war has ended. You must know that. Is Margaret here?'

Mum shook her head. 'I'm not expecting her until the usual time. And I'm not celebrating until we hear that the surrender has come into effect.' She paced the sitting room, stopping and staring at the sherry decanter when she was level with it, but carrying on without pulling the stopper. 'It's expected any time now, but until then we'll remain quiet and calm.'

At that moment in time, Elsie had to agree with Judith that grown-ups were very confusing. 'We had dancing at school,' she said. 'And singing.'

'And Mr Harris kissed a lot of teachers.'

'Some men,' Mum said, lighting another cigarette from the stub of the one she'd been smoking, 'will take advantage of any situation. Go and take off your uniforms, girls. I'll get Mrs Frost to whip up something for you to eat.'

Upstairs, Elsie and Judith looked at each other despondently. 'We would have been better off staying at school,' Elsie said. 'Let's ask Mum if we can take Daisy to meet Margaret from work.'

'Good idea,' Judith said. 'Perhaps by then an announcement will have been broadcast.'

It was a beautiful day. The sun was bright and proud and shone down on them as if it was glad to be doing its duty. They went the long way around to Sorbo, taking turns with Daisy's lead and giving her all the time she needed at tree trunks and hedges. By the time they arrived at the factory gates, the workers were swarming out. They shouted to each other about meeting in the pub to celebrate, slapped their friends on the back and linked arms while they laughed.

Then in the distance, Elsie caught sight of Margaret. Her head was down and her hands were thrust into the pockets of her mackintosh. The sight of her looking so glum made Elsie shiver. Either she was the only one

in the factory not to have heard about the end of the war, or something was terribly wrong. But she shouted, 'Margaret, isn't it wonderful? The war has ended.'

Margaret smiled then and waved, but that didn't convince Elsie that she was happy. Perhaps she was of the same mind as Mum. 'You have come to meet me, my lovely sisters.' Margaret threw her arms around them, then bobbed down to say hello to Daisy.

'Mum's being pedantic,' Judith said. 'She won't allow any celebrations until the official announcement that the surrender has come into effect.'

'Never mind,' Margaret said. 'It will soon, then we can have fun.'

Elsie studied her carefully, hoping to see a trace of that same fun on her sister's face, but nothing shone through.

After an agonising wait, the news Mum had been waiting for spilled out of the wireless and into the waiting world. Then there was more dancing and singing and laughter. Sherry with Mrs Clarke and a phone call from Dad, who made arrangements to meet all of them in London — at long last — the day after next.

The following morning, VE Day, there was a thanksgiving service on the recreation ground. A feast with cake and custard and sandwiches at school, and each child was given an orange and sweets to take home. Elsie fleetingly wondered where the adults had been hiding those goodies. There were pony rides, races, bun-eating contests, a baby show and more dancing. When it was dark, they burned an effigy of Hitler on a gigantic bonfire and as a tribute, a passing RAF Lancaster dipped its wings and banked steeply over the blaze. Everyone shouted and clapped their hands as if they were in a frenzy — except for Margaret. She was distracted and her hands nervously fidgeted with her bracelet as if it were the beginning, and not the end, of the war. Whenever she caught Elsie looking at her, she jolted and the corners of her mouth lifted as if someone had pushed a button to remind her to smile. Her reaction unsettled Elsie, who put her hand in Margaret's and tried to force her into enjoying herself, which seemed to work, but only for a very short while.

* * *

London was more exciting than Elsie had ever imagined and she hoped that now the war was over, they would be able to visit all the places they'd

missed out on. They met Dad, who swung each of them in the air and kissed Mum wetly and embarrassingly on the lips. After an hour outside Buckingham Palace they waved to the Royal Family, who waved back. They laughed at the soldiers splashing around in the fountains in Trafalgar Square; someone spilled beer on Mum's jacket, which didn't seem to bother her at all, and two different soldiers bent Margaret almost in half and kissed her hard. That made Elsie want to cover her eyes.

Despite all that, Margaret showed very little of the utter joy and elation that everyone else simply could not hide. Mum and Dad were so caught up in the celebrations that Elsie didn't think they noticed, although she thought Judith did. *What could be wrong?* Elsie wondered. She could not think of one thing left to cause Margaret so much worry. But perhaps, she told herself, it was because Margaret was a grown-up now. Just another confusing grown-up. Elsie didn't think there could be any other explanation.

Chapter 31

Saturday 16 February 1946

Margaret

Guilt gnawed at Margaret during the long, cold days and dread kept her awake and sweating into her sheets at night.

After the initial jubilation, rationing remained, as did the rubble and blocked drains, homelessness and flu and chilblains. Dad was home more often, but he'd been given another advisory position, which meant he was still needed in London. 'The real work starts now,' he'd told them at dinner one evening. 'Rebuilding, creating a new economy, jobs for the soldiers coming home. And of course, we have to do the same for the Axis countries.'

That had surprised Margaret. 'Does that always happen at the end of a war?' she'd asked.

Dad sighed. 'Not always,' he said. 'But this time it's our duty to help them get back on their feet. They're in a much worse mess than we are, but they'll be in a better position well before us.'

Margaret thought that was most unfair. If it had been up to her, she wouldn't have given them a penny. Then she remembered Fraulein Thiess and Otto, the caretaker and all the people who hadn't broken the glass. The thought of them going without food and clothes or a bed to sleep in made her heart melt with longing to help them in their plight.

'You're not, are you, Margaret?' Dad was blinking at her, a smile on his face.

'I am sorry,' Margaret said. 'I was a long way away.'

'I wondered why you'd asked the question. You're not thinking of going back to Germany, are you?'

Everyone laughed at the absurdity of that. 'I will never return,' Margaret said decisively and there was a consensus of approval from around the table. Even Kathy nodded her head in agreement.

But she might have to. What would she do if Mr and Mrs Kingfisher found out that she had been lying to them — and to everyone — all this time? The thought was unbearable and made her want to hide herself away, but no matter what she did she could never leave herself behind. She

imagined the police bursting into the house, pointing at her and accusing her of manipulating the Kingfishers and deceiving the authorities for years. She could see Mrs Kingfisher's nostrils flare triumphantly and hear her telling Mr Kingfisher that she'd been right about Margaret all along. Elsie would burst into tears — or start to wail — and throw herself into Judith's arms, and both girls would turn their backs on her and cover their ears when she pleaded with them to listen to her feeble explanation. And then there would be the money she would owe to Mr and Mrs Kingfisher and maybe to the government, as well. She would be up in front of the magistrate, thrown into gaol and deported. The whole seedy scene unfolded in her mind over and over again. She often had to excuse herself from her duties at work and rush to the lavatory, where she would sit and weep with fear and exhaustion.

At times, she wanted to blurt out the whole story and have it over and done with, but she always managed to convince herself that she should wait another hour, another day, one more week.

Years ago she had stopped eavesdropping and Judith and Elsie had seemed to tire of that childish game, too. Judith wanted to go to Oxford to study Veterinary Medicine and Elsie also took her studies very seriously. But the phone rang late one afternoon as Margaret was walking past Mr Kingfisher's study, and she stopped and put her ear to its old familiar place over the keyhole.

'Yes, this is Mrs Kingfisher speaking. Thank you for ringing me back. That's correct, I'm trying to get in touch with a Mrs Shulman.'

Margaret felt the colour drain from her face and the pulse jump around in her throat. How she had longed to see that lovely, soft woman again, particularly in their early days with the Kingfishers. They certainly could have done with her help. But what could Mrs Kingfisher possibly want with her now? They were no longer in need of her translating or negotiating or comforting skills.

'Well, perhaps you could help me,' Mrs Kingfisher carried on. 'Or pass me to someone who can? It's an adoption matter.'

Margaret slumped silently against the doorframe and her hand flew to her chest. She thought she was too old to be adopted, but who wouldn't want to legally have the little angel as their own? She was still a petite, beautiful child, with blonde hair and blue eyes and a lovely disposition. It

felt as if the last few stitches that bound them together were fraying, but she knew in her heart that it was the best thing for Elsie.

‘I have two Kindertransport girls — sisters,’ Mrs Kingfisher was saying. ‘One who is nineteen and the other almost twelve. Yes, so I believe. But we would like to sign some sort of assurance of our continuing care for the older girl.’

Margaret caught her breath and fiddled with her sparkly bracelet that was a constant reminder of how lucky she and Elsie had been to be saved. And now it sounded as if the Kingfishers wanted to make the informal fostering agreement permanent.

‘And as I said,’ Mrs Kingfisher continued, ‘we’re quite prepared to adopt the younger. I see, oh yes, that is interesting. Well, thank you. I’ll wait for further news.’

Heart pounding, Margaret stepped back along the hallway. She expected to hear the door opening behind her, but Mrs Kingfisher’s voice came to her again. ‘Henry? Sorry to bother you at work. Can you spare a minute?’

There was a thin smear of sweat on Margaret’s upper lip, which she wiped away with the back of her hand, then her ear was flat against her listening post again in time to hear Mrs Kingfisher say, ‘Eventually, I was put through to the Association of Jewish Refugees, who said that there was no one by the name of Mrs Shulman working for them. That was a long shot, anyway. And it’s been confirmed we cannot legally adopt Margaret, but I told the person I spoke to that we want to draw up a formal commitment to care for her and that we want to adopt Elsie.’

Margaret tried to steady her breathing, which she was sure Mrs Kingfisher would be able to hear.

‘I was told that a large number of people are making the same request, so we must hold tight as enquiries are being made in Germany about all the Kindertransport children. If no family can be traced, then adoption can go ahead. Reports are beginning to filter through and the woman I spoke to said letters about Margaret and Elsie should arrive shortly. Although you’d think one letter would suffice because, if one girl doesn’t have relatives, neither will the other.’

Margaret’s heart seemed to be lodged in her ribcage and her head throbbed to the beat of *they will find out, they will find out, they will find*

out. She didn't know how she moved away from the study door and fought her way upstairs. Every part of her body that was not shivering felt slick with sweat. She lay down on her bed and tried to order her thoughts.

She could wait and hope that whoever Mrs Kingfisher had been talking to was wrong and letters about her and Elsie would simply never land on the mat. Or she could say she wanted to move out, find a flat and be independent — but they would know where she was and would beat down her door when the letters arrived. Tell them now? None of them would ever trust her again. She couldn't bear the humiliation and disgrace. How could she look them in the eye and adequately explain herself? She couldn't. They wouldn't understand why she'd told that terrible lie and clung to it for all these years. The depth of her distress and need for someone to call her own would not be something they could comprehend.

* * *

Day after day, week after week, she played the options out in her mind while waiting for the inevitable envelopes to appear. She lost weight, her hair became dull, blue circles shadowed her eyes. She felt sick with worry and started to make mistakes at work.

Mrs Kingfisher asked her on a number of occasions if she was unwell. 'I think I am a bit sad, that is all,' she replied. 'I thought we would see changes for the better more quickly than we have. And the winter is never-ending.'

'Yes, I know what you mean,' Mrs Kingfisher said, patting her hand. 'But now that it is well and truly over, I'm sure things will cheer up soon. I think I'll get you a tonic from the chemist tomorrow, but for now, let's have a cup of tea and a biscuit, shall we?'

To Judith's questions, she merely touched her stomach and said, 'My cramps are quite horrid. But you know all about that now, too.'

Judith nodded and offered to fetch Margaret a hot water bottle.

'Why aren't you happy, Margaret?' Elsie asked. 'Do you need Kathy?'

'Well,' Margaret said, trying to sound cheerful for her little love. 'I am unhappy because we never read together anymore, and I miss that. You always have your nose stuck in your own book.'

With that, Elsie scrambled for a storybook and cuddled up next to Margaret with Kathy between them.

Then one crisp Saturday afternoon an important-looking buff envelope arrived. Mr Kingfisher happened to be home and he and Mrs Kingfisher took it unopened into the study and closed the door behind them. Margaret heard the sherry decanter pop and the sound of amber liquid glugging into two glasses. ‘That’s that, then.’ Mr Kingfisher’s voice was muffled behind the heavy door. ‘There’s nothing to stop us from ploughing ahead with Elsie’s adoption. Cheers to us and our family. Well done, my darling.’

Margaret’s heart seemed to stop and she wondered what she would do if there was information about her in the same envelope.

Then Mrs Kingfisher said, ‘Yes, but isn’t it strange that the letter doesn’t mention an older sister? We know Elsie has one, after all.’

‘Well, records and documents must have been misplaced and moved or lost during the mayhem. Or perhaps it’s merely an oversight,’ Mr Kingfisher said. ‘I don’t think Margaret’s report will be far behind and it will, of course, contain the same information.’

‘With the added mention of Elsie being Margaret’s sister, I’m sure.’

‘Poor girls. I hope what we’re putting in place will give them some assurance that we want to take care of them.’

‘Yes,’ Mr Kingfisher agreed. ‘And always will.’

But when they found out the truth, they wouldn’t. Margaret nibbled at the already bitten skin around her cuticles and tried to walk on trembling legs. She turned away from the door and wondered where she could go to hide herself from everyone she knew. If only she were no more than that number around her neck she’d hated all those years ago, then she could slither away — like the snake she thought she was. For a split second, she vividly pictured herself at the railway station in Berlin and again at Liverpool Street. She felt the same terror and panic that had come over her then, when she’d wanted to flee through legs, around grown-ups and under tables, down alleyways and side streets.

That was when it hit her like a V-1. The only thing she could do was pack her things and run away. A stifled sob escaped her lips when she thought about leaving all of them — Mr and Mrs Kingfisher, Judith, Daisy, Mrs Frost and especially her Liebling, Elsie. But there didn’t seem to be any other alternatives left open to her.

Chapter 32

Sunday 17—Monday 18 February 1946

Margaret

Where would she stay? How would she get there? Who might she confide in? Margaret forcibly pushed all those intrusive thoughts to the back of her mind. She needed to concentrate on how she could leave the house without being caught out — then she could plan for beyond that.

There was no post on Sunday so she had one day of grace to come up with a plan. She would have to pack whatever she could into her beautiful leather workbag and have it ready to pick up, as nonchalantly as if it were any other Monday morning and leave the house as usual. *How*, she wondered, *could she do all that without giving herself away?* Wouldn't she burst into tears when she hugged Elsie and Judith goodbye? And shouting out to Mrs Kingfisher that she would see her later would stick in her throat. The bag, too, that would weigh down her shoulder would surely be cause for comment. *What would she say if she were asked?*

These questions relentlessly rattled around in her head, making her feel giddy. But she had to try to ignore them and get on with what she knew she had to do. Every chance that came her way, she spent packing and repacking. A book was discarded for an extra pair of knickers. Then they were tossed aside for a pair of gloves that were soon replaced with a scarf. At last, she wedged the door shut and laid out her belongings on the floor around her. She wanted things that reminded her of each of the family members — things she could touch and hold. She stuffed in the beautiful hairbrush she'd been given on the first Christmas they'd spent with the Kingfishers, a tiny lock and key from one of Judith's old diaries that had mysteriously found its way into Margaret's room, a dog biscuit she'd snaffled from the cupboard, and the marcasite bracelet that she'd bought when she was in Kingston-upon-Thames with Mrs Kingfisher.

And of course, she must take something that belonged to Elsie. Once upon a time she'd made a vow never to desert her little love. If they had to flee for any reason, they would flee together. But now she knew that wouldn't be a sign of love and care and responsibility. Quite the opposite was true. Nothing would signal love more than leaving her here, where she

had food and warmth, companionship and opportunities. Margaret put her forehead in her hands and wept quietly. After she left for work on Monday, she would be as completely and desperately alone as when she'd been put on the Kindertransport train in Berlin.

There was a knock on the door and Margaret quickly tidied her face and hair. 'Yes,' she called out.

Around the crack in the door, Kathy floated in as if disembodied. Despite her dire circumstances, Margaret had to laugh. Then she choked back more tears when she thought she might never see that sock doll again — or the little person holding it who hid just out of view. 'Kathy,' Margaret managed. 'How lovely of you to visit me. Do you want to come in?'

'Surprise.' Elsie showed her smiling face. 'I'm here, too.'

Margaret held out her arms. 'Do either of you want a big hug?'

'We both do.' Elsie tumbled against Margaret. 'But what are you doing with all of your things?'

'I am . . . I am . . . going to get rid of the things that I no longer use. Then I will have more space.'

'I would like to do that, too.' Elsie put her arms around Margaret's neck. 'Some things I haven't played with for ages and don't think I will ever again. Like Rosie,' she said with a touch of disdain. 'Will you help me?'

'When I have finished here,' Margaret said. 'I am sure some poor bombed-out children will be very glad of your castoffs. And what about this?' She tugged playfully on Kathy's head and Elsie pretended to scream, her head thrown back and her mouth wide open. 'Kathy isn't a toy,' she said. 'Kathy is Kathy.'

That is true, Margaret thought, staring at the doll, who'd been mended so many times that she looked like a piece of patchwork. She knew then that she would have to take one of the dolls with her. At first, the loss might deeply hurt Elsie, but then she would be happy that Margaret had Kathy with her. The sock had, after all, comforted each of them at one time or another. Hopefully, she would realise that Margaret had made the decision so she would have a part of Elsie with her.

It was better that the doll on Elsie's hand was the original Kathy, which Margaret knew Elsie could not bear to be parted from. So the second Kathy must be somewhere in Elsie's room and all Margaret had to do was pocket

it and then push it to the bottom of her bag next to her post office savings book and the change she kept in a little purse.

* * *

There was no proper sleep for Margaret that night. If it wouldn't draw unwanted attention to her, she would have roamed the house memorising every detail in every corner. As it was, she lay awake, watching the grey shadows in her room shift and transform. As the night wore on, she repeated her plan over and over in her mind until she could recite it backwards. She must have nodded off here and there, only to snap awake with hot tears misting her face. At last she fell into a deep sleep until she heard the girls thundering around the house — they'd all overslept and she could do nothing but keep up appearances by joining in the mayhem that ensued.

Wash, dress, gulp a cup of tea and half a slice of toast. Pat Daisy; plait Elsie's hair; a quick hug at the door with both girls, who strained to release themselves from Margaret's arms; goodbye to Mrs Frost and Mrs Kingfisher. 'See you after . . .'

Then that bit was over and there was no time for tears and sentimentality. Walking quickly, she took the route she'd planned through the back streets to the station. She looked neither left nor right, because she couldn't trust her reaction if she saw someone she knew, but no one called out to her or waved until she passed the market and thought she caught a glimpse of Mrs Clarke's mother coming out of the newsagent's, clutching a paper in her hands. Without hesitation, Margaret covered her mouth and nose with her scarf and crossed the street. Her heart was pounding, but she steadied it by reminding herself that Mrs Clarke's mother couldn't see very well and would have been intent on watching her step.

When she asked for a one-way ticket to the next stop on the line, she was sure the ticket clerk appraised her as if she were a murderer on the run. She could feel the woman's hooded eyes boring into her. With trembling hands and faltering voice, she pushed the money under the grille and pulled the ticket towards her. 'It leaves in four minutes, duck,' the woman said. 'Platform Two.'

Hardly aware of how she'd got there, Margaret slumped against the door in between carriages and went over the next steps she'd devised: close

her post office account, phone the Association of Jewish Refugees and beg for a bed in a hostel somewhere — if they still existed. Then get herself there.

‘Are you sure you want to take all of it out, my dear?’ the clerk in the post office asked her.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Quite sure.’ Then, because she thought she ought to give more of an explanation, she added in a chirpy voice, ‘I have been invited to stay with my aunt so will need money for my keep.’

The man studied her over his glasses. ‘Where does your aunt live?’ he asked. ‘If I may be so bold. The post office has counters all over the country. It might be better to leave some of it in until you need it. It’s not safe for a young girl like you to carry so much cash about with you.’

Margaret forced a smile. ‘I will be okay,’ she said.

But he didn’t take his eyes off her and she thought that, like so many others she’d spoken to over the years, he was momentarily surprised by the remnants of her German accent. Without rushing, he counted the money out, stamped CLOSED on her passbook and handed them both to her.

‘Thank you very much,’ Margaret said.

‘My pleasure,’ he replied, although his voice was cold.

Next she found a telephone box, called enquiries and asked for the number for the Association of Jewish Refugees. While it rang, she rested her hammering head on the cold glass. She felt terrible, confused and lonely and adrift, but her plan was stuck firmly in her mind like a scratched record and she could do nothing but adhere to it.

‘Hello,’ a woman’s voice said. ‘This is the AJR. Can I help you?’

‘I hope so,’ Margaret said. She could smell the fear leaching out from her pores. ‘I am a Kindertransport child and I have nowhere to stay.’

‘When did you arrive in this country, Miss . . . ?’

‘Bower,’ Margaret said.

‘B-a-u-e-r?’ The woman sounded out the German spelling.

Margaret hesitated. But it felt right to be addressed by her old, familiar name. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘That is right. Margarete Bauer. I arrived in thirty-eight. I have been with a family but they can no longer . . .’ She stumbled, because the truth was too complicated to tell. And if the woman on the other end got an inkling that she had left a good home of her own volition,

she might not be willing to help. Hunger gnawed at her, making any hope of logical thinking seem out of reach.

‘Miss Bauer?’ the woman asked. ‘Are you still there?’

‘Yes, I am here,’ Margarete whispered. ‘I have nowhere else to go.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Nineteen,’ Margarete said, worried now that she might be too old for help.

‘We’re seeing this situation with a lot of Kindertransport children who are now your age.’

Disloyalty washed over Margarete in a towering wave. The Kingfishers hadn’t turned their backs on her. They had been willing to care for her for the rest of their lives. It was she who had let them down terribly.

‘Can you get to your local synagogue?’ the woman asked. ‘The rabbi will give you temporary help.’

‘I do not go to synagogue,’ Margarete said. ‘I . . . have not been allowed.’

‘Please hold, Miss Bauer,’ the woman said. ‘I will help you. Don’t go anywhere.’

A queue had formed behind her and the next person in line gave the door a sharp tap. ‘One minute.’ Margarete held up a finger.

Just as she was about to give up, the woman said, ‘Can you get to Brightlingsea?’

‘Yes,’ Margarete said. She didn’t have a clue where that was but knew she would find her way.

‘There’s a house there in Chapel Road. It’s called Cherry Tree Hostel. I will tell the matron, Mrs Silverstein, to expect you. She will inform me when you have arrived safely.’

‘Thank you,’ Margarete whispered.

‘Shalom, Miss Bauer.’

Margarete recognised the word. She remembered it from the orphanage and the synagogue — when she’d attended in Berlin. As she repeated it to the woman on the other end of the line, it seemed as if the soft syllables reached out and wrapped strength and comfort around her.

Chapter 33

Monday 18 February 1946

Elsie

Margaret wasn't usually late home from work. She liked to help Elsie with her homework, if needed. Elsie knew she could ask Judith or Mr Kingfisher when he was at home, but Margaret was always so pleased to be asked that she tried to turn to her first. They would also have a chat about what had happened during the day, and then everyone would sit down to tea together. The headmaster had given Elsie a special mention and a certificate in assembly for writing a good book review, and by the time the clock chimed seven she was getting impatient to show it to her sister.

'Where is Margaret?' Elsie asked. 'Does she have to work late tonight?'

'I shouldn't think so,' Mum answered. 'That doesn't happen very often, but I suppose you never know.' She went back to eating her marrow and lentil stew as if Margaret's absence wasn't a concern for her.

Elsie didn't like her dinner — the marrow was soggy, the gravy runny and the lentils were hard to chew — but Judith wasn't having any difficulty with hers. 'May I please have a piece of bread to wipe around my plate?' she asked.

'Of course,' Mrs Kingfisher said. 'Go and ask Mrs Frost. She's still in the kitchen.'

When Judith had finished using the bread as a sponge, her plate looked as if it hadn't been used. 'It's not like her to be late, though, is it?' Judith said. 'I'm getting a bit worried.'

'Well, don't bother yourselves,' Mum said. 'Margaret must be allowed to have time to herself. Perhaps she's gone to meet a friend. She'll be home soon enough.'

But Elsie didn't like it; she felt as if something besides the stew was off. 'Do I have to eat all of this?' she asked. 'It's not very nice.'

'No, you don't,' Mum said. 'But you know the rule, Elsie. If you don't finish your dinner, you can't really be hungry. Therefore, no afters.'

Elsie groaned. Why did grown-ups have so many rules? 'What is for pudding?' she asked.

‘Blackberry shortbread.’ Mum watched her intently for her reaction.

‘Oh no,’ Elsie groaned. That was one of her favourites.

At that moment the telephone rang, and when Mum went to answer it Elsie put her stew on the floor for Daisy. Judith laughed and shook her head. ‘That was good timing,’ she said. ‘You’re so jammy, Elsie.’

‘You won’t tell, will you?’

‘You know I won’t,’ Judith said. ‘And that’s probably Margaret now, explaining why she’s late.’

But it was Dad, saying he was going to catch the last train home. That prompted Elsie to wonder why Margaret hadn’t found a telephone to let them know she wouldn’t be home on time. It was so easy; there were phone boxes everywhere. Why wouldn’t Margaret use one? It wasn’t like her to let others worry.

‘Perhaps Margaret will call soon,’ Elsie said. ‘And look at my plate, Mum. I asked Mrs Frost for bread like Judith did.’

‘Well done, poppet,’ Mum said, with a distracted look on her face. She gazed up at the clock, which showed half past seven. ‘Yes, I hope she’ll ring. She knows the number.’

Eight o’clock came and went and Mum put Margaret’s plate of stew over a pan of simmering water to keep warm. When she called to the girls, it sounded as if she were trying to keep her voice steady. ‘Go upstairs and get ready for bed,’ she said. ‘I’ll be up soon to read to you.’

Elsie felt a churning lump form in her stomach. Bombs hadn’t dropped since the war had finished, but there were plenty of potholes in which Margaret could have ricked her ankle — like Dad had done — or she could have been hit by a motor or kidnapped by a man who liked the way her hair sat on her shoulders. She could feel something rise in her throat that felt like a scream waiting to burst from her mouth. ‘But Margaret always reads to me,’ she said in a loud voice. She clenched her fists, then fumbled in her pocket for Kathy.

‘I’ll read to you first.’ Mum put her arm around Elsie. ‘Then as soon as Margaret comes in, I’m sure she’ll run up the stairs to take over. Go along now, Judith will go with you.’

Judith took her hand and led her away, but not before she glimpsed Mum shrugging her shoulders and Judith shaking her head in a mute reply. Elsie couldn’t know for sure, but she thought they were silently saying they

had no idea why Margaret hadn't come home as usual. And because they seemed worried, Elsie became more agitated, too.

As they brushed their teeth, Elsie asked Judith what she thought had happened to make Margaret break her routine. 'I think,' Judith said, trying to sound matter of fact, 'that she's gone to the pictures to see *The Trojan Brothers*. And if she has' — Elsie could tell Judith was pretending to act annoyed — 'I shall be very cross as I wanted to see that, too.'

Without skipping a beat, Elsie asked, 'Who would she go with?'

'Any number of friends, I suppose.' Judith spat white foam into the sink and stepped aside for Elsie to do the same.

'She never does anything with anyone else.'

'Tonight might be different. Or maybe a boy asked her to eat dinner with him.'

Elsie shook her head. 'She would have telephoned.'

'Do you want me to brush your hair?' Judith asked, running her fingers through the waves created by Elsie's plaits.

'It's okay, I can do it.' Elsie quickly dried her face and hands. 'I'm going to get Margaret's brush from her room. She won't mind.'

'You should wait to ask her first,' Judith reprimanded. 'It's not very nice to . . .'

Elsie pushed open Margaret's door and the air that greeted her was colder than usual. Her footsteps echoed around the space that felt somehow empty and drained of life. That was no surprise though. Margaret had been sorting through her things yesterday to give herself a bit more room. She turned on the bedside light and shivered. The beautiful brush wasn't on top of the dressing table and Elsie began to hunt for it, but the more she looked the more she found gaps where Margaret's precious things had been. Her bracelet was missing from the bedside table, and she would never have worn it to work — whether she was meeting a boy or not. Judith's old lock and key that had been moved from surface to surface was nowhere to be found. The little tube of lipstick was gone from its pride of place next to the mirror and, when she thought about it, Margaret's toothbrush had disappeared from the cup in the bathroom. Elsie couldn't think what all this amounted to, but she knew it wasn't anything good. Opening the wardrobe and drawers, she could tell without searching that there were more things missing than Margaret could have worn that day. Terror overwhelmed her.

Margaret had gone away without her. Ever since she could remember, she and her sister had been together, and Margaret had promised that was how it would always be. It felt as though the walls and floor and everything solid was slipping away from her. Her stomach lurched and for a moment she was abandoned in the dark, airless cupboard again. She fumbled her way towards the door and shouted, 'Judith, Mum!' at the top of her voice. Then she opened her mouth and released a thunderous caterwaul, more terrifyingly loud than any scream she'd let loose since her first day at school.

Mum and Judith ran up the stairs to find Elsie sitting in a corner of Margaret's room, her mouth wide open in a feral howl and fingers crawling Kathy around her neck. 'Elsie.' Mum fell to her knees. 'What do you know? Try to stop screaming and tell us.'

Elsie closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. She felt sure Mum and Judith could see her heart thumping under her jumper. Then she gathered her strength and started to wail again.

'Judith,' Mum said. 'Say something to make her stop.'

'That is enough, Elsie,' Judith said in a controlled voice. 'You must tell us what's happened and then we can help Margaret.'

That did the trick. Elsie wiped her eyes on Kathy and made a sweeping motion around the bedroom. 'Things are missing. As if she's moved away.'

With darting eyes, Mum took a quick inventory of the room. 'She hasn't moved away,' she said, a tremor in her voice. 'She's run away from us. But why would she do that?'

Elsie saw Judith narrow her eyes and stare at her mother.

'No, Judith,' Mum said. 'Margaret and I have not fallen out again. Nothing has come between us.'

'Then I don't understand it,' Judith said. 'She seemed happy. I thought she was . . .'

'Get up, Elsie,' Mum said. 'Be quick, girls. Check your own rooms, please.'

'What are we looking for?' Judith asked.

'A letter or a note. Or anything else that might be missing.'

They scattered and turned out their possessions and the sounds of doors opening and closing, books and ornaments being pushed aside, clothes hangers grating against metal rails filled the hallway.

‘Anything?’ Mum called out.

‘Only Kathy,’ Elsie replied.

‘Elsie, please. Not Kathy right now.’ Mum sounded exasperated.

‘The second Kathy,’ Elsie said. ‘She’s missing.’

That realisation seemed to be significant for all three of them. Margaret had taken Kathy — the doll who was so much a part of Elsie that something Margaret thought insurmountable must have happened. *But nothing was ever completely hopeless*, Elsie thought, *was it?* They had escaped Nazi Germany; lived through an extraordinary train journey across Europe to England; defeated the bullies at school; learned to speak flawless English; changed their names. What could possibly have driven Margaret to turn her back on everything — especially Elsie — after all of that?

‘Right, Helena. Think.’ Mum squeezed the top of her nose between her fingers.

‘Telephone Dad,’ Judith said.

‘Yes, I must. And while I do that, you girls find three torches and get ready for the cold. We are going to find her.’

Elsie and Judith pulled on their warm things and waited by the door for Mum. Elsie felt sick and Judith fidgeted with her nails.

‘Why do you think our sister has left us?’ Elsie said, close to tears.

Judith was about to answer when Mum appeared. She exchanged a glance with Judith that was so furtive Elsie nearly missed it. Then she raised her eyebrows and mimed a bulge on her stomach.

With just as much subterfuge, Judith knotted her face in a frown and shook her head.

‘Dad’s catching the next train home and we’ll meet him at the station. Here’s what we’ll do until then,’ Mum said as they headed out of the door. ‘We’ll drop off the key with Mrs Clarke and ask her to wait in our house in case Margaret comes back.’

Their feet barely touched the ground as they almost broke into a run. Elsie looked around at the dark corners of unlit houses, the shifting shadows under looming trees, the pub doorways with the stench of hops leaking from them. She’d been warned about drunken men and murky places where bad things could happen. She could not understand why Margaret would expose herself to those horrors when she could be at home reading her a story or brushing her hair.

‘If she does return,’ Mum was saying, ‘I’ll tell Mrs Clarke to rugby-tackle her to the floor if necessary. I must get to the bottom of this. Then you two will go in one direction and I’ll go in the other. We must shine our torches in every cubbyhole and hiding place and call out her name.’

‘When we find her, Mum,’ Judith said, an edge of insolence in her voice, ‘do not immediately start to get cross with her. At least get her home first.’

For a second Mum froze. ‘I do believe you blame me for Margaret’s disappearance,’ she said. ‘But please believe me when I say it had nothing to do with me.’

For a reply, Judith shrugged her shoulders, grabbed Elsie’s hand and marched on.

Mrs Clarke looked very confused as she stood in her slippers and listened to Mum’s garbled story. Then she said, ‘Of course I’ll wait in your house, Helena. But you always did say that one was trouble. Perhaps it’s time to let her go. She is, after all, quite old enough to—’

‘We’ve had no problems with her for quite a while now.’ Mum lifted her chin defiantly. ‘And if she does want to start a life on her own, so be it. But we must know she’s safe. Thank you, Iris, for your help.’ She put the key in Mrs Clarke’s hand.

‘Don’t you want one little sherry to fortify you before you start your search?’

Mum was clearly frustrated. ‘I’m grateful, but we haven’t the time. Perhaps when this is all over.’

If Elsie didn’t think the situation was serious before, she certainly did now — as far as she was aware, Mum had never before turned down a glass of sherry.

‘Wait.’ Mrs Clarke held up her hand. ‘I think Mummy mentioned seeing Margaret. But that might have been yesterday. Mummy,’ she called in a loud voice. ‘She’s a bit deaf,’ she mouthed.

And her sight’s terrible. Elsie thought they were wasting time. *She wouldn’t have seen a thing.*

Mrs Clark’s mother shuffled to the door and nodded her head when she heard the whole sorry tale. As if they were all deaf themselves, she told them in a loud voice that she’d seen Margaret crossing towards the station early that morning, her face covered with a scarf.

Everything that held Elsie together seemed to empty out of her. She gazed down, expecting to see a puddle of her watery remains around her feet. The colour seeped from Mum's face and Judith's hand twitched in hers. 'We have to get to the station,' Elsie said, pulling herself away.

'Yes, we must,' Mum agreed. 'I hope you understand, girls, that unless she's been sitting in the waiting room for hours she won't be there. But we must follow the lead.'

Together they searched every inch of the station and asked the ticket clerk if she'd seen a tall, strong-looking young woman with ears that stuck out a little bit from under her dark hair.

'I haven't,' the woman said. 'But I only clocked on after the dinner break. If you come back in the morning, you can talk to Mrs James, who was on duty then.'

Elsie couldn't remember ever feeling so frightened — not since she'd been in that dark cobweb-filled cupboard in Berlin. They flopped down miserably on a bench to wait for Dad without a word between them. Elsie hoped he would know what to do. If he'd been able to organise D-Day, surely he'd be able to handle this. A shrill shiver ran through her, every bit as discordant as fingernails scraping a chalkboard. She reached into her pocket for Kathy, wrapped the doll in her fist and pressed herself close to Judith.

Chapter 34

Wednesday 29th May 1946

Judith

Spring sunshine is shimmering through the train windows on the way to Brightlingsea, but it hasn't pierced the cold that's deep inside me. Elsie, clutching my free hand, feels chilly too. Mum and Dad are sitting opposite us, trying hard to make a jolly outing out of the whole thing, but failing miserably. None of us is very enthusiastic. Dad tried to put Mum's large bag in the overhead luggage rack, but Mum held on tight to the strap and I know why. The letters that Mum wants to show to Margaret are in its depths.

After months of frantic wondering and searching, going over and over everything that could have happened to Margaret, the answers to some of our questions turned up all at once last week.

When we returned from walking Daisy, Elsie and I had been summoned to the sitting room where Mum and Dad sat with a sherry. Mum, in particular, has been drinking a lot more of that sickly-sweet alcohol lately. And yes, I do know what it tastes like from experience and so does Elsie — we tried it so we could find out what all the fuss was about. They both looked exhausted and Mum was ashen. From their solemn faces I thought the meeting might be about Margaret, and for one awful moment I was petrified that our sister might have died. I could well imagine that Elsie was thinking the same because she threaded her arm through mine and held on tight. Not very long ago she would have dragged Kathy from her pocket and snuggled the sock doll into her neck, but when Margaret left with the second Kathy she'd put the original to the back of a drawer, and has not taken it out since. It's as if she can't run the risk of losing that piece of comfort, too.

'We have some news for you girls.' Dad blinked a few times as if he wasn't sure of his surroundings. 'It affects both of you, but Elsie more than anyone.' He glanced across to his foster daughter.

'What is it?' Elsie asked in a small voice. 'Is it Margaret?'

'Do you remember when a letter about you arrived from Germany?'

Elsie nodded.

‘It verified your name, age and the orphanage you had been living in and told us that none of your family could be traced, so we were free to adopt you.’

‘Yes, and I’m very happy about that, Dad,’ Elsie said. ‘But we already knew I didn’t have any other relatives except my sister. And she only has me.’

I thought she might start to cry so I wrapped my arm around her shoulders.

‘Yes, well . . .’ Dad continued, first looking at his hands and then at his feet. ‘At long last the letter about Margaret arrived and I’m sorry, but what she told all of us is not the truth. She has never had any siblings. And neither have you.’

Elsie shifted forward and I could feel her arm trembling beneath mine. I shook my head. Grown-ups cannot stop themselves from being confusing. ‘I don’t understand,’ I said. ‘Do you, Elsie?’

Elsie seemed too bewildered or frightened to say a thing.

‘There is no other way to say this, little poppet,’ Mum said. ‘But Margaret is not your sister.’

Through pale lips Elsie’s voice rose to a fevered pitch, ‘That is not true. We found each other on the Kindertransport. Everyone’s always told me that.’ She started to sob, her shoulders heaving up and down. The pitiful noise was enough to break my heart.

First Mum, then Dad, sat and comforted her, but I felt as if I was in shock and needed to be cared for, too. I picked up Daisy and buried my face in her fur.

‘The letter about Margaret said she has no relatives and made no mention of a sister who had been sent to another orphanage — nor did your letter, Elsie,’ Mum said. ‘Which should have raised more concerns.’

Elsie wiped her eyes and listened intently.

‘So, we made further enquires,’ Dad carried on. ‘And we found out that neither of you has ever had a sister or brother.’ He sounded sad and demoralised. ‘The only conclusion we’ve been able to come to is that Margaret made up the whole story.’

‘But why would she do that?’ Elsie’s voice was high and thin.

‘We don’t know for sure,’ Mum said. ‘But perhaps so she could pretend she had a family member or to be able to have a home instead of being

taken to a hostel or maybe it was just something that slipped out of her mouth and then she couldn't take it back.'

'How could she keep it up for so long?' I asked. 'She must have known that we would be understanding and still love her even if she told us the truth.' Then I looked at Mum and I could feel doubts overwhelming me again. 'But maybe not.' I stood and put Daisy on the floor.

'Don't start blaming your mother, Judith,' Dad said. 'She's doing her best to—'

'But she hasn't always, has she?' I spat out. 'That's the nub of the matter. Poor, dear Margaret couldn't tell us because she was afraid of your reaction, Mum. Wasn't she? And she believed when the letters came she'd be out on her ear. All she did was take the matter into her own hands.'

Mum sobbed in time with Elsie's tears. 'I know I made mistakes in the early days,' she said. 'But Margaret and I eventually became the best of friends. You must have seen that, Judith. I'm desperate to find her and bring her home. Please stop punishing me.'

But something inside me felt cold and hard. I grabbed Elsie's hand and yanked her up from the sofa. 'Come on, Elsie, let's go upstairs and work out a plan to find our sister.'

Like a limp and compliant doll, Elsie stood up, then she said, 'I don't understand all of these accusations, but they are making me feel as terrible as finding out that my sister is not my sister. Stop it. Stop it now!' She stamped her foot on the floor and flailed her arms about like a petulant toddler, making me — and my parents — red-faced with shame. Then she ran upstairs and locked herself in her room.

Hot on the heels of that, Mum reported that she'd received a telephone call from an organisation called the Association of Jewish Refugees and Margaret was in a hostel in Brightlingsea and wanted to see us. Elsie and I had cried with relief when we heard she was safe, so here we are, on our way to Essex to try to persuade her to come home with us. She must, we all miss her so much.

The train is slowing down now for the station, so I'll stow away my diary and pen, put my arm through Elsie's, take a deep breath and face whatever comes next.

* * *

‘Shalom,’ Margaret said when she opened the door. She looked thinner, but her complexion was clear. Her familiar red lipstick was painted on her lips and the marcasite bracelet glinted on her wrist. There was a huge smile on her face although she seemed a bit nervous. I know I was. So was Elsie, whose hands trembled when she handed over the small bouquet of flowers she’d bought from the high street. ‘Thank you, Elsie,’ Margaret said shyly, standing back from the door to let us in.

We huddled in a dark, musty-smelling hallway that emphasised Margaret’s large frame while we wrestled with our coats and scarves and gloves. Then Elsie hurled herself at Margaret and cried into her shoulder.

‘I am so sorry, Liebling,’ Margaret said. ‘There was nothing else I could do.’

The sudden use of that word — Liebling — surprised me as Margaret hadn’t used German for a long time. But there was more to come.

‘Margaret,’ I said, hating myself for sounding as stern as Mum had when she spoke to Margaret years ago. ‘You could have told—’ I started, but a door opened and a young man stepped through from the kitchen and put his arm around our older sister.

‘Please meet Kurt,’ Margaret said. ‘Kurt Goldschmidt.’ He was an inch or two taller than Margaret, with dark wavy hair and soft brown eyes. He wore a kippah on his head. ‘He is a very special friend.’

‘Would you like me to make tea, Margarete?’ Kurt asked, in a rather thick German accent.

It seemed strange to hear Margarete’s German name after all this time. ‘Yes please, Kurt,’ she said. Then she turned to us. ‘I have reverted to my original name, Margarete Bauer. Not to be disrespectful,’ she added quickly. ‘But because it makes me feel more like myself.’

We all looked at each other and nodded and I tried to understand that from Margarete’s point of view.

The kitchen was warm and welcoming and Margarete introduced a few other young people, who quickly slipped away to another part of the house.

When the tea and biscuits were on the table in front of us, Margarete said, ‘I wanted to see you, not only because I miss you but because by now you must have received a letter about me from Germany. So you know that I lied and betrayed your trust. I truly apologise to all of you. Especially to you, Elsie.’

‘I don’t want you to say sorry,’ Elsie said in a confident voice that surprised me. ‘I just want you to come home so everything will be the way it was before.’

Margarete shook her head slowly. ‘Things have changed, little one. I don’t think they can ever be the same again.’

‘But we can try.’ Dad coughed and blinked a couple of times. ‘Come back with us and we can sort all of this out.’

Kurt sat back and crossed his legs. His eyes widened and he looked at Margarete as if she were the most precious thing in the world — which she is to me and Elsie, too. It passed through my mind that she’d probably had a lot of better kisses with him than the one she’d had with Mick. An immersion heater rumbled from the direction of the basement and a cuckoo clock that had seen better days announced the hour.

‘Here are the letters from Germany, Margarete,’ Mum said. ‘Do you want to read them?’

Margarete put her hands up to save herself from having to look at the evidence. ‘I know what they say. I know better than anyone that I have no family in the world.’ She turned to face Elsie. ‘What I did was wrong,’ she said. ‘But when you were put into my care on the train journey from Berlin, all I hoped for in the world was to keep you safe. And I thought the only way I could do that was to say we were sisters.’ She put her face in her hands and started to cry. Elsie went to comfort her, but Kurt got there first.

‘It’s okay,’ Elsie said. ‘Just come home. We all want you to be with us.’

Margarete looked from one to the other of them, then her eyes settled on Kurt. His features darkened like I’d seen Margarete’s do a hundred times or more. She shook her head firmly. ‘No.’ She sounded adamant. ‘It is time for me to do and be something different. And time for all of you to be a family without me.’

‘No,’ Elsie shouted. She thumped the table so hard that her teacup rattled around in the saucer. ‘We are not a family without you.’

‘You are not a family with me either,’ Margarete said, covering Elsie’s hand with her own. ‘I must let you grow and become independent with the help of the Kingfishers and the time has come for me to find my own way.’

‘And what is your way, Margarete?’ I asked. I was beginning to think we were not going to get through to her.

‘I have started to go to the synagogue and take Jewish instruction. There is so much I do not know, Judith. But what I can say is that it makes me feel comfortable and at home.’

‘It is the same for both of us,’ Kurt said. ‘And we are thinking about emigrating to the United States,’ he addressed Dad. ‘America has never persecuted Jews and has opened its doors to immigrants from Europe. I am sure you have read about it, Sir.’

‘Of course,’ Dad said. He was talking to Kurt but looking at Margarete, as if he wanted to make sure she agreed with what Kurt was proposing. ‘But Margarete, it sounds’ — he shrugged his shoulders. ‘I don’t know. Precarious.’

Margarete smiled. ‘I have faced worse.’

There was no come-back to that.

‘New York?’ Dad asked. ‘Or New Jersey?’

‘California,’ Margarete replied.

Elsie gasped and tears filled her eyes.

‘That’s a long way away,’ I said.

‘Yes,’ Kurt said quietly. ‘It will truly be a new beginning for us.’

We sat in silence for a few moments, then, after a bit of shuffling, Dad got to his feet. ‘If we can’t persuade you, all I can say is, you know where we are.’ When he turned his head, the light caught the sadness in his eyes.

‘And Margarete.’ Mum reached out and put her hand on her foster daughter’s arm. ‘You will always be a part of our family. A big part. Perhaps more than you will ever know.’

I really wanted to believe she meant every word. She looked and sounded as if she did, but the clashes she’d had with Margarete in the past continued to nag at me. I couldn’t help wondering if the rift between them — which was Mum’s fault because she was the adult — was the reason Margarete ran away and the imminent letters no more than the catalyst.

‘And you will always be welcome,’ Dad said. ‘No accusations or questions asked.’

‘Except by me,’ Elsie said. ‘You know how I like to ask . . .’ She started to cry again and, when I looked around, everyone but Kurt had joined in.

There were hugs and kisses and goodbyes at the door. A little way down the road, Elsie stopped and told us to keep walking. She said she

would catch us up along the way. Mum and Dad hesitated, but she turned and headed back towards the house. ‘Go on,’ I said to my parents. ‘I’ll trail behind and make sure she’s all right.’

On the path leading to the house, I ducked behind a tree and listened as Elsie poured her heart out to Margarete. ‘I want to thank you, Margarete,’ Elsie said, ‘for everything you’ve done for me. I would never have made it through our ordeal if I hadn’t had you. I don’t care about letters or biology or who said or did what for whatever reason. I love you dearly. You are “meine Schwester” and you always will be.’ Then she turned and barrelled past me towards the station. While I waited for her to gain some distance, I heard Margarete whisper, ‘Liebling,’ to her disappearing back.

Chapter 35

August 1956

Elsie

Judith would not believe it when Elsie told her. Elsie could hardly believe it herself even though the evidence was right there in the letter that was just out of reach on the dressing table where she sat brushing her hair. She'd had it permed recently and so many people said she looked like Doris Day that she thought she ought to learn to sing 'Que Sera, Sera'. She put on her dark-framed, cat's-eye spectacles and hoped they would squash that superficial comparison flat.

She stared at the battered white envelope, its peeling grey and orange stamp depicting the Statue of Liberty, and wondered: *why is Margarete coming home now?* Despite inviting her back for Judith's starring role in the Oxford Revue; her graduation from veterinary school; the party to celebrate her becoming a partner in the veterinary practice; her marriage to Hugh — another vet who worked with her; the tragic loss of their first child; Elsie's twenty-first birthday; the paintings she'd had exhibited at Kettle's Yard; Mum's decline into the state she was in now, Margarete had only been back once in all those years and that was a brief visit for Dad's funeral. They'd been so weighed down under the burden of grief then that there hadn't been any time or energy to get to know each other again.

Elsie applied a thin smear of lipstick, blotted it with a tissue and put the green tube in her bag. Once upon a time, make-up was only produced in gold-coloured packaging; now it was housed in every shade of the rainbow. But whenever she saw a classic gold bullet, she was reminded of the lipstick Margarete was accused of stealing and the one that Mum and Dad had bought as atonement. Elsie thought that, although she'd tried, Margarete had never been able to forgive their mother for that, or other injustices she'd experienced and endured.

Elsie hadn't really understood exactly what had been going on at the time, or the implications. All she'd wanted was for everyone to get on, be happy and have fun. Her imagination could stretch no further than the immediate time and place that surrounded her. Why not live in a calm, quiet, contented environment if you could, she'd thought. They'd escaped

Nazi Germany, they had food, a family to care for them, toys and clothes — why spoil that? But now that she was a grown-up, it was easier to understand their childhood from Margarete's perspective. The way she'd been picked on and ostracised and threatened. Mum had eventually come to her senses and tried to make a pet of Margarete, but by that time her sister had been traumatised and become wary. At least, that was what Elsie surmised. She'd never had the chance to talk to Margarete about any of it and she'd learned early on that Margarete would not answer the questions she asked in her letters. But maybe she would have that chance soon. If the three of them could have some proper time together they might be able to bulldoze through the barriers that had built up between them.

Judith was waiting for her in a corner booth of The Cricketers. Elsie raised her hand in greeting at the same moment her sister lifted her Gin and It in a gesture of cheers and her eyes towards the heavens. Elsie knew what that meant — here we go again — and her stomach tumbled in response. This was their weekly meeting to fortify themselves before they visited Mum in the home or asylum or hospital or whatever it was.

'I like your hair.' Judith brushed Elsie's cheek with her lips and they exchanged a cursory hug. 'You look like Doris—'

'Don't.' Elsie raised her hand in protest. 'I'm going to let it grow or shave it off if one more person says that.'

'Well, it's your fault for being so lovely. Even with the spectacles.' Then she gave Elsie a wry smile and started to hum the song that was being played everywhere that summer.

'Or if anyone else sings that loathsome song to me.' Elsie took a long draught from her glass. 'This is lovely. Is it a double? Thank you.'

'We need it,' Judith said. 'For what lies ahead.'

'I know that only too well,' Elsie said, shrugging off her coat. 'But I've said it before and I'll say it again, I'm sure. It's ironic that we knock back so much alcohol before going to see Mum, who's been ruined by the stuff.'

Judith sighed. 'But we don't drink all day, every day, do we? And because of Mum we're more aware of the dangers than most other people.' She looked at her glass mournfully.

'Another?' Elsie asked.

Judith nodded and they both burst out laughing.

With a fresh drink in front of them, Elsie noticed how well Judith looked. Better than she had since her baby girl had died soon after she'd been born. It was incomprehensible to her that a baby could have the same date on both her birth and death certificates. 11 January 1956. Elsa Margaret Carlton. Seven pounds eight ounces. With all the advances in medical science, the doctors had not been able to untangle the cord — both life-giving and life-snatching — from around the helpless mite's neck.

A group of young men sat at the table next to them, chinking their glasses together and looking across at Elsie and Judith as if they were theirs to appraise. A blush crept across Judith's face, but Elsie gazed straight ahead and said, 'You'll never guess, so I'm going to tell you. Margarete's coming home for my graduation.'

Elsie thought Judith's jaw would hit the table.

'You're right,' Judith said. 'I would never have guessed that. Why now?'

'Exactly the question I asked,' Elsie said. 'Here's the letter. I thought you'd want to read it yourself.'

Judith took the envelope, smoothed down the piece of paper and began to move her mouth as she read the contents to herself. Elsie followed along with the now-familiar words.

I would love to come to your graduation. Thank you very much for inviting me. You must be so proud of yourself, as I am of you.

The children can stay with Kurt as I could do with a break from all of them. But someone will be coming with me who I would like you and Judith to meet.

Will I be able to see Mrs Kingfisher? I would not want to suddenly appear and unsettle her or disrupt her treatment. Perhaps you could pave the way for my visit.

I will take care of everything this end, if you could please book me into the same hotel in Cambridge that Judith will be staying in. I am presuming — or should it be assuming — that other than that I can stay with you or Judith.

I will be in touch again with dates.

Love from Margarete X

Without a word, Judith set her lips in a rigid line and handed back the letter to Elsie. The sisters sat looking at each other for a few moments and Elsie thought she knew what was coming.

She was right as Judith flared her nostrils and said, 'Bloody cheek.'

'At least she's coming,' Elsie said. 'We've wanted to see her properly for years. It will be lovely.'

'I doubt it,' Judith grumbled. 'Too many things have happened. It's too late.'

'I don't agree with that at all,' Elsie said.

'Okay.' Judith took another gulp from her glass. 'I think this deserves another double. Same again for you?'

Elsie said yes and hoped it would lighten the mood.

But it didn't. They took a couple of silent and sullen sips before Judith said, 'If she'd just said she was coming home for the celebration, that would have been fantastic.'

Elsie sat and waited for the 'but'.

'But she has no right to be so demanding. Book me into the same hotel as Judith. Pave the way for me with Mum. I'll be able to stay with you. And who is this person she's bringing with her instead of her husband and children? She doesn't know how lucky she is to have three little ones she desperately needs to get away from. I'd really love to meet my niece and nephews.'

'Yes, so would I,' Elsie said softly. She realised she felt the same way she had as a child, when she desperately wanted everyone to get on. For a split second she thought if she pointed to the gin, rubbed her tummy and said, 'Mmm, I like it,' Judith would laugh and instantly become less bitter.

But Judith was unstoppable once she got into her stride. 'And she probably only wants to come now so she can boast about being fundamental to your success. As if she had anything to do with it.'

The time had gone when Elsie could change Judith's mood with a throw-away remark. But she hoped she could make her sister understand that her own feelings about Margarete were different. 'She actually did have a lot to do with it and Margarete isn't boastful,' she said. 'Come on, you

know that, Judith. She's never been anything but humble and modest. She's only asking us to help facilitate the visit we've — I've — longed for.'

Judith wouldn't let her eyes meet Elsie's. She looked around the bar until she noticed a dog sitting next to its owner. 'That pooch reminds me of Daisy,' she said.

Elsie twisted her head and nodded.

'I still miss that dog so much. We went through such a lot together.'

'So do I,' Elsie said. 'She was beautiful and a comfort to all of us.'

They sat in silence for a few moments. Then Elsie leaned across the table and grabbed Judith's hand. 'Margarete and I shared so much,' she said. 'The fear that gripped us during Kristallnacht. Knowing that the noise and baying crowds and the stench of hate were directed at us, for reasons we couldn't comprehend. Hiding under beds, being shoved in cupboards, not knowing if we would die of thirst and starvation in the dark corners we'd been driven into.'

Tears welled in Judith's eyes and she held on tight to Elsie's hand.

'And then the journey. When that man took me to the train I had absolutely no idea where I was going or why. All I had was Kathe — with an e again, by the way — until Margarete opened her arms and heart to me. She was my companion and comfort. Meine Schwester.'

'It must have been terrible,' Judith said. 'I've heard about it so many times and still it fills me with pity for you. But the journey was so short in comparison to the time you spent with us supporting you as your family. That's when you really flourished.'

'Of course. And you know how grateful I am. Nevertheless, because of that journey and the way Margarete took care of me for years, she and I are intrinsically linked. Like you and Daisy, I suppose.'

Judith pulled her hands away from Elsie. 'There is one huge difference,' she said. 'Daisy never abandoned us.'

She's so like her mother used to be when we were growing up, Elsie thought. *She always has to have the last word.*

* * *

The same acrid whiff as always wafted towards them when they walked into the nursing home. Elsie closed her eyes and breathed out for a long time, hoping to acclimatise her sense of smell to the odours she could never

quite recognise. Boiled meat; used incontinence pads; flaking skin and rotting teeth.

‘How is she today?’ Judith asked the nurse on duty.

‘Calm,’ the nurse replied. She flicked through Mum’s notes with capable, square-shaped fingers. ‘The doctor has upped some of her meds, which seems to help.’

‘Which medications are they?’ Elsie refused to use acronyms or shortened words; there was no need to change perfectly good language. ‘And what are they used for?’

‘They’re used to stop cravings and help the patient to rest. They certainly seem to be doing the trick.’

When they pushed open the door to Mum’s room, she didn’t stir from her seat near the window. Outside, the full glory of a silver birch dominated the scene and Elsie wondered if Mum would be here to see it devoid of its leaves in the autumn.

‘Hello, Mum.’ Judith strode across the swirl-patterned carpet and kissed her mother on the top of her head.

Not quite so confident, Elsie followed suit and noticed that even more of Mum’s scalp was showing through her hair than it had been on their previous visit. That made Elsie want to cry. Her skin was dull and grey, too, the only colour in her face coming from the vivid, broken blood vessels on her cheeks and around her nose. Over her lap, she hugged a blanket that couldn’t disguise her distended stomach. It was heartbreaking. Mum used to take so much pride in her appearance. She had always looked smart, well-groomed and stylish. Now, she couldn’t care less whether she was washed or not. But the nurse was right — Mum was calm.

‘Did you bring me anything?’ Mum’s voice sounded as dry as a piece of stale toast. She pointed to their bags and waited.

Judith took out a paperback copy of *The Bafut Beagles*, by the ‘animal man’ Gerald Durrell, and Elsie produced a large bar of Cadbury’s Dairy Milk chocolate. Mum looked at both offerings with disdain. Elsie knew her mother had meant a bottle of sherry or gin or whisky — any alcohol at all. She put the sweet treat on the table next to the book and sat down on a chair facing her mother.

The younger women took it in turns to bring Mum up to date on what had been happening in their lives. Nothing they reported made a difference

to their mother's disengaged manner. Then Elsie said, 'Do you remember I told you last time we visited that my graduation is coming up? I will be awarded a first-class honours degree in Law from Cambridge.'

There was no response from Mum.

'The ceremony is towards the end of October and Margarete is coming home especially. Isn't that wonderful news?'

Mum twisted towards them, her thin, wrinkled face contorted with confusion and anxiety. Her nostrils flared and she narrowed her eyes. 'After all this time?'

'Yes, Mum.' Judith sounded more enthusiastic about the idea than she had in the pub. 'And she wants to come and see you.'

'Why?' Mum rasped.

'Because you're the closest person to a mother she's ever had,' Judith said. 'She probably wants to thank you for everything you did for her and Elsie.'

Elsie hoped that might be the case. It would be lovely if Margarete and Mum could forgive one another for the hurt — real or perceived — that they'd caused each other. After all, Mum had little time left and Margarete might not come home again for another ten years.

Mum's eyes darted about. She put her hand on her chest and shook her head. 'I don't think I can,' she said. 'No, I don't want to see her.'

'You'll regret it if you don't,' Judith said. 'We'll be with you, won't we, Elsie?'

'Of course.' Elsie nodded her head. 'It will be quite like old times.'

But Mum became agitated. She tried to stand up on wobbling legs and, when Elsie and Judith got her on the bed, she was trembling from head to foot. It seemed as if she had something else to say, but couldn't get the words past her dry, flaky lips. Elsie ran for the nurse and when she arrived, pushing a medication trolley, the sisters slipped out of the home.

'That was a worse reaction than I expected,' Judith said. 'Are we going to let them meet?'

'I think it would be a good idea,' Elsie said. 'But we'll have to see what she's like when the time comes.'

They threaded arms and walked through the streets towards Judith's bus stop. It was mild enough for groups of people to stand about chatting to

each other over fences and two or three people were finishing off their gardening in shirt sleeves.

‘Here we are then,’ Judith said, repeating the kiss and hug from earlier. ‘Let me know if you hear anything else.’

Then Elsie went towards the house they’d grown up in and Judith to the flat above the veterinary practice. Elsie turned back once to watch Judith for a few moments. Her back was straight as she waited in the queue and Elsie wondered if anything would be resolved by Margarete coming home or if that would only make matters worse.

Chapter 36

Tuesday 21 August 1956

Judith

How I wish Hugh wouldn't grill me every time I come home from visiting Mum. It infuriates me. I know I don't have to tell him every single thing that Elsie and I talk about beforehand or when we're with Mum, but somehow he gets it out of me. Then he never sympathises or tells me I'm doing my best. He tries to help me with suggestions about how I can handle the meetings better. But in reality, all that does is make me feel small and inadequate.

'I don't think you should keep criticising Margarete when you meet up with Elsie,' he'd said last night.

'I don't grumble about her.' I was trying to defend myself. 'I'm just annoyed at some of the things she's said and done, and I let Elsie know that.'

'It seems quite reasonable to me that Margarete would want to leave your family home after everything that happened to her.' Honestly — he speaks as if he was there and I know nothing about it.

'And not come back?' I said. 'Even though we begged and pleaded with her? She turned her back on all responsibility for Dad when he was ill, and now for taking care of Mum too, when we could really do with her help.'

'Sounds to me like she'd had enough responsibility with all those chores she had to do in the house,' Hugh huffed. 'She was nothing more than a servant for—'

'That's not quite the case.' I raised my voice. 'And Mum soon made amends.'

'Thanks to you.' Hugh's voice softened. 'You made sure your mum understood how cruel her actions had been.'

'Please don't use that word.' I felt tears in my eyes. 'It was a different time. Mum didn't think she would have two Kindertransport children to take care of. Oh, I don't know.' I threw up my hands and let them land in my lap. 'It's all a terrible muddle.'

‘Just make the most of Margarete’s visit and try to go with the twists and turns, if there are any.’

Tears coursed down my face and I reached for a tissue. I used to be as easy-going as Hugh. That was one of the reasons we were attracted to each other. But now my stomach constantly churns, I have throbbing pains in my temples and I come out in a cold sweat when I least expect it. Both Elsie and Hugh have called me bitter for different reasons and, although I refuted it adamantly at the time, I think they might be right.

First there was the house. When Dad died he left it to Mum, and when she had to be admitted to the home, Hugh and I considered moving into it with Elsie, who was only there during the vacations from Cambridge. It certainly is big enough for all of us. But eventually Hugh said he didn’t want to leave sick animals alone every night or give up our twenty-four-hour emergency service. I understood his reasoning, but now we’re stuck in this pokey flat that’s overflowing with journals and newspapers and useless things we’ve accumulated over the years. Not to mention the nursery equipment that mocks me every time I open the cupboard to get out the carpet sweeper.

And that’s another thing that’s made me bitter — and who can blame me? The first sight I had of my precious baby girl was her being whisked away to resuscitation. Hugh and I had clung to each other, a hollow of helplessness growing where baby Elsa used to lie curled up inside me. The second glimpse was of her swaddled in a pink blanket, her bruised eyes shut tight and her tiny chest still and lifeless.

It had taken me so long to get well enough to hold a cup of tea or walk outside or think about what to eat. Elsie and Hugh willed me back to some kind of life and, because they wanted me to be my old self quickly, I didn’t like to tell them that I wasn’t ready to face the world, so I did what Hugh suggested and went with the twists and turns and pretended that my broken heart had mended.

‘You can try again,’ the doctors had said. And they suggested that be sooner rather than later. Hugh agreed, but I was terrified, both of getting pregnant and of never getting pregnant again. I tense whenever Hugh comes towards me in bed and, if I do manage to let him make love to me, his solid body on top of mine feels like a ton of bricks, trying to squeeze the life out of me as my cord did to the baby.

And Elsie calls me bitter because of Dad's OBE. Not the gong itself, of course, but the fact that he left it to her in his will. I don't think I'll ever understand why he did that. Did he feel sorry for her? Was she his favourite? Did he think I had enough of his things and she had nothing? He'd invited both of us to accompany him to his investiture because Mum was in a state by then, and we were so proud. We'd both made a huge fuss of him. We'd had our photo taken outside the gates and then, over dinner, we tried on the medal before putting it back in its box and returning it to Dad. Had Elsie been more gushing in her praise? Or maybe I'd appeared aloof and unimpressed. The questions went round and round in my head, but no answers followed, and I was left feeling as if I'd perhaps made up everything good about the relationship I'd had with the father I adored.

'Dad probably made his decision on a whim,' Elsie had said, much to her credit. 'Let's share it. I'll keep it for six months, then you have it for the same length of time.'

But I hadn't wanted that to happen. It wouldn't paper over the fact that Dad had wanted her — and not me — to have it.

Then there is Margarete's visit to contend with. Elsie is over the moon and there is a part of me that is longing to see our sister, too. But I'm also full of trepidation about the topics of conversation that will come up and how I'll handle them. At the moment, I feel as fragile as a sapling in a storm and I don't think I can take another critical statement or delving question that's aimed at my innermost thoughts and feelings and fears. I'm frightened, too, of exposing the guilt I feel. Guilt about not having done enough to stop Mum making things difficult for Margarete all those years ago. Not helping the poor girl with her chores. Or using the telephone to let Dad know that things were not right at home. But would he have done anything about it? D-Day would have been so much more important. Then I feel guilty about the frosty, high and mighty tone I took with Margarete when we visited her in the hostel. I wish now I'd shown more empathy and insisted she come with us.

I know I should take Hugh's advice and go with the twists and turns of the time my sister and I have together, without worrying in advance about the outcomes, but that is something I can't seem to achieve right now.

It will help that a lot of Margarete's time with us will be mapped out for her. The tour of Cambridge. The graduation and the dinner afterwards.

Discussions about Elsie's future. Introductions to Margarete's mysterious friend. Snaps from the last ten years to share and the visit to Mum. But there will also be quite a lot of free time, which I will do my best to avoid. That will be helped along by Margarete staying with Elsie at the house in Woking. I will also have my shifts here at the practice to fulfil, and perhaps I can take on a few more to make up for all the time I've missed. Hugh would be delighted with the chance to have a few more games of golf.

So there it is. If anything should happen to me, Hugh and Elsie will read my diary and know how I feel about the things that have made me so very bitter. I can write them down, but don't seem able to talk about them. It's as if I think doing so will let myself and others down.

Oh, I am so melancholy. I'm sitting here in the shadows of dusk without even bothering to turn on the lamp. Hugh is downstairs with the last of his patients and will expect supper when he comes up, but it seems like too much of an effort to unfurl my legs and mess about with pots and pans in the kitchen. A sherry might help me on my way and, although I know I shouldn't, it wouldn't hurt this once, would it? It might even help me to relax a bit if Hugh reaches for me tonight in bed.

Chapter 37

Thursday 22 November 1956

Margarete

A blast of cold air hit Margarete as she walked down the aeroplane steps. She'd forgotten just how cold England could be. She clutched the rail with one hand and, with the other, she attempted to rearrange her flimsy head covering to keep out the cold around her neck. Behind her, she heard Dieter's sharp intake of breath. 'Blimey, as my foster father used to say. Brass monkeys.'

On the tarmac, Margarete turned and said, 'And it is only October.'

'Thank goodness the graduation wasn't in December.' Dieter buttoned the top of his inadequate jacket.

After going through Immigration, they retrieved their luggage and queued for Customs. They didn't say much, although Dieter yawned once or twice. It had been a long, tedious journey for him. But Margarete had been full of nervous energy. She'd read for a little while, eaten some of the food she'd been served, closed her eyes in an attempt to sleep and twisted from side to side in the confining seat. Elsie and Judith, as she thought they would look now, floated through her mind. She'd seen the occasional grainy photo, but knew from experience they were never reliable likenesses. And she'd thought about Mrs Kingfisher, who'd become a ruined wreck, according to Elsie and Judith. It had even been hinted that a visit to her foster mother might not be possible, and she had been torn between disappointment and relief when she'd heard that.

Now she wondered how she would be greeted by her sisters. She hoped they would accept her and that they could all have a marvellous, jolly reunion — but they were no longer girls who had been thrown together. There was a lot that could and should be said among them — if they allowed that to happen.

After clearing Customs with their suitcases, Dieter asked her if she was ready. 'Take a deep breath,' he said. 'And make the most of seeing your sisters after all this time.'

It was good advice, so she nodded, and then she was through the automatic doors and into the hubbub of the terminal.

All manner of people crowded against the barrier and one by one they peeled themselves away to wave shyly or blow kisses or hold out their arms to friends and loved ones. Margarete stood and scanned the eager faces, then suddenly a young woman who looked like a bespectacled Doris Day shouted, broke free and ran into the channel cordoned off for arriving passengers. She threw herself against Margarete, tears coursing down her pale, ethereal face. And with an instinct so visceral and profound that she couldn't have stopped herself if she'd wanted to, Margarete buried her face in Elsie's neck and whispered, 'Liebling.'

They stood like that for the longest time while the anxiety that had accumulated in Margarete's stomach dissipated. In its place was a feeling of deep serenity mixed, if that were possible, with the butterflies of excitement. Eventually, Dieter pointed out an approaching security guard and said, 'I think we should move along. And your other sister is probably waiting her turn.'

They found Judith half-hiding behind a large man and bolstered by the reception she'd had from Elsie, Margarete went towards her with a beaming smile.

'Hello, Margarete,' Judith said, giving Margarete the merest semblance of a hug and a pat on the back.

There was a vague whiff of the sweet sherry that Mrs Kingfisher had favoured on her breath, which took Margarete by surprise. She stood back. 'Lovely to see you, Judith,' she said. 'You look wonderful.' She did, but in a thin, pinched way. Her brown hair wasn't as thick and glossy as it had been and her ready, girlish smile had been replaced with the slight upturn of a trembling mouth. *Age or circumstances have spoiled her looks and temperament*, Margarete thought. The tragedy of the baby and Mrs Kingfisher's illness had taken their toll.

'This is Dieter,' Margarete said. 'You must remember him, Elsie?'

Elsie looked at the man who stood behind Margarete. He was tall and his dark hair was groomed neatly around his kippah. Above his trimmed beard his cheekbones were strong but his eyes were soft. 'No.' She shook her head and grasped his outstretched hand. 'Have we met before?'

'Of course not,' Margarete said. 'But I told you the story when we were growing up. I am sure I did.'

'There were so many stories.' Elsie laughed.

‘And a lot more now,’ Margarete said. ‘I will remind you about the history I have with Dieter soon.’

‘We have a train booked for Woking,’ Judith said. ‘Can I help with one of the cases?’

‘I couldn’t possibly allow that.’ Dieter smiled at Judith. ‘But do we have time to grab a coffee first?’

Judith looked at her watch and reluctantly agreed. Margarete linked Elsie’s arm and tried to do the same with Judith, but Judith lagged behind and made small talk with Dieter.

‘You both look so fabulous,’ Margarete said. ‘And very modern.’ She wondered what her sisters thought of the dull, loose skirt that hung shapelessly below her knees, the grey jumper with a high collar and long sleeves and the head covering that she kept fiddling with. But neither of them said a word, so perhaps the few photos they’d exchanged had prepared them to see her dressed in this modest style.

Margarete was glad when Judith volunteered to get the coffee as she didn’t think she could cope with pounds and pence after all this time away. It was bad enough hearing the plummy roundness of British vowels, dropped consonants and endearments like ‘love’ and ‘pet’, and feeling the brutal draughts from the automatic doors that opened and closed every few seconds. The smell, too, of toast and milk and pastries, was overwhelming but somehow comforting.

‘Let’s get Dieter out of the way,’ Elsie said.

‘Hey, that’s rather harsh given we’ve just met.’

Elsie laughed out loud. She seemed to be so excited and reached out for Margarete’s hand. ‘I meant the story about Dieter.’

‘He is the boy from my orphanage who gave little Jürgen a whack on the back during Kristallnacht,’ Margarete explained. ‘It was very mean and I told him off.’

‘I have repented so many times that I’m sure Yahweh has forgiven me, but your sister is not so easily appeased. Please don’t pay any attention to her. We tease each other as if we are brother and sister.’

Margarete thought she read Elsie’s mind about whether there was more to her and Dieter’s relationship than that, but her sister would soon see that there wasn’t.

‘Another Kindertransport child, then?’

‘Yes,’ Dieter replied. ‘I’m happy and grateful to say that I am.’

‘And what about Jürgen?’ Elsie asked.

‘I’m afraid I have no idea what happened to him,’ Dieter said gently. ‘If only I could ask for his forgiveness face to face, and that of anyone else I may ever have hurt or upset.’

‘Well,’ Elsie said playfully. ‘I forgive you. Don’t you, Judith?’

‘It sounds as if there’s nothing to pardon, it was just kids’ stuff, after all. Every one of us has been guilty of that.’ Her voice was low and almost emotionless and Margarete wondered if she was bored or shy or wary.

On the train journey home, Dieter explained that he was immigrating to London to join the very first Jewish Seminary for Liberal and Reform Judaism in England.

‘Are you going to be a rabbi?’ Elsie looked astounded at the idea.

‘No,’ Dieter said. ‘I’m going to train to be a teacher.’ He looked at Margarete from under his lashes. ‘I’m trying to convince Margarete and Kurt to move with me . . .’

Elsie let out a yelp and beamed first at Margarete, then at Judith, who did nothing more than raise her eyebrows.

‘. . . But so far that hasn’t happened, although they are beginning to develop a more liberal attitude. Perhaps this trip will help.’

With that, Margarete pulled off her head covering, applied a layer of her signature red lipstick, which was striking on her otherwise fresh face, and clasped her lovely, twinkling bracelet around her wrist. Dieter threw his hands up in mock horror. ‘Goodbye to the old laws,’ he said.

‘Yes, Goodbye to All That,’ Elsie trilled, quoting the title of Robert Graves’ famous book.

* * *

During the following few days, Margarete started conversations about the house that she thought must echo around her younger sister, living there on her own. They discussed what Elsie planned to do after her graduation. True to her studious nature, Elsie had it all worked out leading up to sitting the Bar examination. ‘You were always so clever,’ Margarete said, buttering a piece of toast at the breakfast table.

‘So I should be,’ Elsie said. ‘I’ve been blessed with wonderful opportunities.’

‘We both have been,’ Margarete said.

‘It wasn’t quite the same for you,’ Elsie retorted. ‘Which must make you feel . . .’

But Margarete shook her head. She didn’t feel ready to spoil things or open old wounds, so instead she said, ‘And then what? I mean what kind of law do you want to practise — family, criminal, employment?’

‘Human rights,’ Elsie replied without hesitation. ‘There must never be another Holocaust.’

‘Amen to that, little one,’ Margarete said. ‘I am so proud of you. Oh, is Judith meeting us today? I have not seen much of her.’

‘She said she had quite a few shifts at the practice.’ Elsie sounded as if she’d rehearsed the answer.

Margarete thought this might have been the time for Hugh to stand in for Judith so the sisters could meet with each other, but it felt presumptuous to voice her opinion. She couldn’t expect to slot right back into her place in the family after an absence of ten years, but she tried to broach the subject of the baby. ‘Should I tell her how sorry I am about her losing the baby?’ she said. ‘I sent a card at the time, but maybe . . .’

Elsie shook her head so violently that the spectacles almost flew off her face. ‘No.’ She was adamant. ‘She could hardly get out of bed or take a sip of water. I honestly thought we’d lose her to grief.’ With the first hint of an accusation, Elsie looked at her sister through narrowed eyes. ‘You weren’t here to witness her distress, but I was. It was frightening and painful and none of us want to go through that again.’

That, Margarete thought, had put her firmly in her place.

* * *

Dieter joined them in Cambridge, where Elsie led them on a guided tour of The Backs, lush willows sweeping over the river. They stood on the Mathematical Bridge and watched the punts gliding along the Cam. For one awful moment in King’s College Chapel, Margarete thought Dieter was going to shatter the reverential hush by singing a verse of ‘Hava Nagila’, but he didn’t get past humming the first few bars. With pride, Elsie showed them the minute room she’d lived in at Downing College, and Margarete bought three small, unofficial Cambridge scarves from the market to take home to her children.

Margarete could not believe the majesty of the Senate House where the graduation took place, but Elsie seemed to take it all in her stride — as if she'd been born to attend ceremonies in such grand buildings. Outside, Margarete smiled as she watched Elsie and her friends throw their mortarboards into the air.

'I bet Oxford was just as lovely?' she asked Judith, who hadn't said anything that wasn't superficial since Margarete had arrived. She longed to unlock whatever was holding her sister back, but Judith greedily held on to her thoughts and feelings, grudges and grievances.

'I enjoyed it,' Judith said. 'It was a good five years.'

'Did Hugh go there, too?'

'No, he went to Edinburgh. I met him when he advertised for a partner in the practice he was opening.'

'Well, you certainly seem to make a good team, in more ways than one.'

Judith made a non-committal noise with her tongue.

Taking a deep breath for courage, Margarete said, 'I often wonder what it would have been like if I had gone to university. I have a feeling I would have had a wonderful time, but you never know how—'

Suddenly, Judith whipped around to face her. 'Go on.' She was so close Margarete could smell the cloying stench of sherry on her breath again. 'Say everything you want to say. Mum wouldn't let you carry on at school. You had to go out to work in that horrible, toxic factory. And I didn't help you, did I? You blame me, I know you do, for the fact that you're not the linguist you wanted to be, and probably for so much more.'

'Judith.' Margarete felt stunned. 'I was merely making small talk, which is all we have done since I have been here.'

'And whose fault is that?' Judith said with a vicious hiss. 'You leave us for years and years and then expect us to stand on our heads for you just because now happens to be a convenient time for you and your . . . friend to visit.'

'Judith,' Margarete tried again. 'I do not blame you for anything. Can we please talk about this when you are not so angry?'

But Elsie came running towards them and she looked as confused as she'd done as a child when there were arguments or dark silences or an exchange of gestures behind her back, so that Margarete could not say

anything else. Elsie looked from one to the other of her sisters, her eyes not as bright as they had been, and said, 'The Varsity?'

'I cannot wait.' Margarete beamed at her sister and they twisted their arms together as they manoeuvred their way to the restaurant through the narrow streets.

After that, Margarete saw even less of Judith but she concentrated on Elsie, much as she'd done when they'd first arrived on the Kindertransport — which might have had something to do with the wedge that was between her and Judith now.

Then Elsie relayed the news that Judith had called to say the nursing home had cancelled Margarete's visit. Apparently, Mrs Kingfisher became too agitated every time Margarete's name was mentioned and they were worried about her heart, her blood pressure, her lack of appetite and her incontinence. Margarete didn't believe Judith. She thought her foster sister had made up the story so she wouldn't have to face Margarete in what could be a difficult situation for all of them.

'Please tell Judith that I would like to see Mrs Kingfisher for no more than a minute or two. I just want to hold her hand and thank her for what she did for me.'

'Here's the phone,' Elsie said. 'You can tell her yourself.'

Margarete didn't want to speak to Judith on the phone, but still felt she couldn't say 'no' to anything Elsie asked her to do.

'It isn't me stopping the meeting,' Judith said coldly. 'It's the medical staff. I'm sorry, but there's nothing I can do about it. I'll give Mum your message.'

Margarete hoped she would, but to be certain she would also ask Elsie to do the same.

'Will I see you and Hugh at the airport tomorrow?' Margarete could hear how needy she sounded.

'I'm sorry again,' Judith said. 'But Hugh and I have a doctor's appointment that clashes with the time you're leaving.'

'That sounds as if it might be good news, if you are going to see a doctor together. Are congratulations in order?'

Margarete could almost see Judith shrugging in her small flat. 'No,' she said curtly. 'There is nothing to get excited about.'

She should have felt happy and uplifted to be going back to California to see Kurt and the children, but instead she felt low and deflated. Dieter and Elsie came to see her off and were sharing a taxi back to London.

‘Think about all the things we discussed,’ Dieter said to her.

‘I will,’ she promised. ‘I will share everything with Kurt and let you know.’ She turned to Elsie. ‘Your turn to visit me next.’

Elsie was in floods of tears. ‘Maybe,’ she managed. ‘If I can. I’ll try.’ Then she pulled on Margarete’s arm. ‘I’m so sorry it didn’t work out with Mum and that you didn’t get to see much of Judith. I hope you don’t blame me in any way.’

She looked as young and vulnerable and alone as she had the first time Margarete had claimed her for her own. ‘Being with you again after all these years was wonderful, Meine Schwester,’ she said. ‘And you have never been to blame for anything.’

Chapter 38

Sunday 3 July 1966

Margarete

Going to watch *The Sound of Music* had been one thing, but what Elsie was proposing was quite another.

‘How could your sister possibly equate an Oscar-winning film with a protest outside the United States Embassy?’ Kurt ran his hands through his thinning hair and shook his head in frustration. ‘She really is quite something. But she is a barrister, after all.’

‘It is all to do with human rights,’ Margarete defended her sister. ‘Elsie’s one motive in life is that no one should have to suffer what the Jews went through during the war. You know that.’

‘Okay. I concede that point and how it applies to protesting against the war in Vietnam. But *The Sound of Music*?’

Elsie had taken her and Judith to see the film as an early gift for Margarete’s fortieth birthday. They’d had such a lovely, giddy time, with dinner beforehand and drinks after, that it was hard to remember Elsie’s logic about why it was important to view the film from many different perspectives in the fight against prejudice and tyranny. She thought hard, then tried to put her sister’s reasoning into words.

‘Bear with me,’ Margarete said. ‘I am not as articulate as my sister.’

‘I’ve borne with you for twenty years and I’m not going to give up now.’ Kurt smiled at her and she couldn’t help but giggle.

‘I think the gist of it was that in a free, democratic society everyone should have the right to create art of any type.’

‘Even if that art has fascist persuasions?’ Kurt put his hands in his pockets. ‘I’m not saying *The Sound of Music* has or hasn’t. It’s a theoretical question.’

Margarete thought about that. ‘Yes, probably,’ she said. ‘That preserves the democracy. But people should criticise and challenge those things that are not truthful and just.’

‘And how does that work for the film? Seems to me it’s had accolade after accolade and award after award. Everyone loves it and truly believes that the Second World War was no more than a musical in Nazi Germany.’

‘That is the main problem. Crowds came out of the cinema singing “The Hills are Alive”, including Judith. She thought it was wonderful.’

‘She’s a different woman since she’s had baby Henry in her arms.’

Margarete took out a newspaper from behind her back. ‘But it is not everyone who has been hoodwinked. A number of people have been writing letters to editors about how the film distorts history.’

‘Oh.’ Kurt snorted. ‘And I suppose Elsie was one of them.’

‘Of course.’ Margarete handed Kurt the paper. ‘Among others.’

‘*Dear Sir,*’ Kurt read aloud.

As a Kindertransport child who escaped Nazi Germany just after Kristallnacht, I would like to point out to your readers that, while the rise of Nazism in Germany might have lent itself to singing and dancing on the part of some of the population, there was no merriment in the lives of Jewish people. We lived in the most suffocating, abject fear. We had to sing our traditional songs in a whisper and look over our shoulders when we made any kind of movement, let alone dancing. Perhaps these aspects of the war have been conveniently forgotten — after such a short period of time — by those involved with the making of The Sound of Music.

I call on them, or any others brave enough, to put the record straight and produce a film devoid of the gloss and fripperies that will give the masses a true indication of what life was like for Jews in Germany during that period of time.

Yours hopefully

Margarete Goldschmidt (Mrs) née Bauer

Kurt took off his reading glasses and balanced them on his forehead. ‘Well, Margarete Goldschmidt née Bauer. Don’t you ever complain again about not being articulate. This is an excellent letter. I’m proud of you.’

Margarete beamed.

‘Instead of wasting your time at protests about a war on a different continent, I think you should consider again trying to get a degree in

Linguistics.'

'I am shocked.' Margarete shook her head. 'Not in my back yard. Turn a blind eye. Nothing to do with me. What if the world had done that at the beginning of the war? And we have been over the university thing so many times. No one would have me. I do not have the qualifications.'

'I never had you down as a defeatist,' Kurt said. 'You have English, German and Hebrew.'

'But I could not write an academic essay,' Margarete shot back.

'Well, if that letter's anything to go by . . .'

They both turned their attention to Elijah, taking the steps two at a time with his violin case swinging from his hand. It hadn't seemed like five minutes since that was her, Elsie and Judith thundering down the same stairs. 'What are you two faux-intellectuals on about now?'

'Your mother has had a letter published in *The Times*,' Kurt said. 'Here, do you want to read it?'

'No time,' Elijah said. 'I'm late for rehearsal.' He put on a light fawn-coloured jacket and fiddled with the collar, then admired himself in the hall mirror. He was much taller than his father, but had the same brown, soulful eyes as Margarete, that darkened when he was perturbed. He kept his hair fashionably long, which hid his sticking-out ears, and his large feet were splayed slightly when he walked. Two traits all the children had inherited from her. 'Bye,' he shouted before banging the door behind him.

'I've told you so many times not to do that,' Kurt called after him. Then he studied Margarete for a few moments. 'Would you let him go to the protest?' he asked.

'He is going, for all we know. He never tells us anything.'

'How about Esther?'

'Hmmm.' Margarete deliberated. 'I think she is too young. Not a grown woman like me. And before you ask, definitely not Jacob.'

'You've made up your mind, haven't you?'

Margarete nodded.

Kurt tutted in resignation. 'I'll go and warm up the soup,' he said.

Margarete sat for another few minutes on the new sofa she'd bought to replace the one with broken springs soon after they'd moved into the house in Woking. She loved the feel of the green nap on the armrests and massaged the material with her palm. They'd also thrown out a number of

pots and pans, toiletries, the old blackouts they'd come across in the attic and the beds. Behind one of them she'd found the book she'd been given when she left school, which she shared with her teenage children, who loved the old-fashioned pictures and turns of phrase. There had also been countless bottles of the cheap sherry Mrs Kingfisher had craved stashed away in every imaginable hiding place. Thank goodness Judith had given up the stuff when she'd found out she was expecting Henry.

Margarete thought about how awkward it had been when they were informed that Mrs Kingfisher had left the house to all three of them. Judith and Elsie had turned towards her in the solicitor's office and stared as if they were accusing her of manipulating their mother into changing her will. Margarete had been allowed to visit Mrs Kingfisher just once, and on that occasion neither money nor the will had been mentioned. In fact, Mrs Kingfisher didn't so much as look her in the eye as she related stories about her life. When the half hour was over, Margarete had kissed her parched cheek and whispered, 'All is forgiven and forgotten. Shalom.'

A shiver had run through her foster mother's frail body, but other than that she hadn't given any indication that she'd heard or understood what Margarete had said.

She gazed out at the garden to where Mrs Kingfisher had grown wartime vegetables and looked forward to getting the window — beneath which they used to hide when they snooped — replaced with double glazing.

In the end, it had all worked out. There had been trust funds and bank accounts for Judith and Elsie, which seemed to appease them. That and the money Margarete paid to buy out their shares in the house enabled them to start anew — Judith in a three-bedroomed house with a purpose-built veterinary surgery attached, and Elsie in a lovely cottage in a London mews. Margarete had breathed a sigh of relief. They were friends again.

'Raw bread or toast?' Kurt called from the kitchen.

'Toast, please. But I will come and get it.' The dog-flap captured Margarete's attention again. She didn't like it and wanted it to be removed. It reminded her of Daisy and all the good — and hurtful things — that had happened in the house. No matter which, they all brought an unwelcome lump to her throat. Although it had been the most practical thing to do, she sometimes wondered if moving back was the best idea for her.

* * *

Thousands of protesters moved as one mass towards the embassy in Grosvenor Square. Elsie held on tight to a banner that read: *Hands off Vietnam* and Margarete held on tight to her. It felt as though if she didn't, she might shake so violently that she would fall over and be trampled into the ground. *I am a silly, pampered woman*, she thought. After all I've been through, I'm trembling at this. But that was precisely what was causing her so much anxiety. The crowds, the slogans, the stomping feet, the piece of glass she crunched beneath her boots.

Elsie, too, had turned pale and Margarete wondered if demons from their childhood had also been brought to life in her sister's mind, as they had in hers. But they marched on regardless until they turned into Grosvenor Square. There they found a police cordon around the embassy and, seemingly out of nowhere, the hordes reacted by pushing, shoving, spitting, snarling and hurling themselves at the bobbies and each other. It seemed as if suddenly the fight was about causing mayhem rather than drawing attention to the message they wanted to get across.

Elsie's spectacles slipped down her sweaty nose and then she was knocked sideways and lost them altogether. 'My glasses,' she cried out. Behind them a police motorcycle was rocked until it fell over and some idiot threw a lit match into the puddle of petrol leaking from it.

'Elsie,' Margarete shouted. 'We must get out of . . .' But when she looked around Elsie had been swallowed by the throng. Margarete's heart seemed to stop and for a terrible moment she thought she might lose control of her bladder. Where was the little one? How could she have been so irresponsible as to allow Elsie in among this mob? Immediately she was back on the Kindertransport, the Wehrmacht officers closing in on her and her angelic sister.

A man stood up with a loud-hailer and urged the protesters to disperse, but Margarete no longer cared about the protest or what it stood for. All she could think about was finding Elsie and keeping her from danger.

At last she spotted her sister, crushed up against a lamppost and out of her reach. If she darted through that tall man's legs, underneath one of the banners, around the men aiming jabs at each other and straight through a large group of people huddled together, she could get to her.

Then five people walked solemnly towards the door of the embassy, handed in a piece of paper, and it was over. 'Elsie,' Judith cried. 'Elsie, I am here.'

Tears ran in dusty streaks down Elsie's face. 'I can't see a thing.'

'Hold on to me.' Margarete put her arm around Elsie's shoulder. 'We must get out of here in case things flare up again.'

In the pub, they talked about what had happened with disbelief in their voices. 'Let us find another way to protest, if we must,' Margarete said.

'We must,' Elsie said. 'But I agree with you, I don't want to be in the thick of that again any time soon.'

Margarete picked up a beer mat and twiddled it around her fingers. 'Did that bring back any bad memories for you?' she asked.

'I've never been to a protest before,' Elsie said. 'So, no.'

'Not Kristallnacht or the crowds jeering at us on the streets in Berlin?'

Elsie shook her head. 'I can barely remember those things,' she said. 'But when I do, I'm back in that claustrophobic cupboard I was jammed into.' A shudder ran through her. 'I hate enclosed places.'

'That must have been hard for you being hemmed in by that mob today, then,' Margarete said. She gently touched Elsie's arm.

'A lot of people have to put up with harder things than a mildly violent rally that broke up after two hours.'

Margarete sat back and let the sun shining through the window warm her face. A group of young men, still arrogant enough to loudly repeat their slogans in rumbling voices, swaggered in. She was glad Elijah wasn't one of them. When they saw the red-rub indent where Elsie's glasses had grazed her nose, their faces softened and each looked as if he wanted to be her Prince Charming.

'Kurt would be furious with me if I told him all the details,' Margarete said. 'So I am going to keep my mouth zipped. Please do the same when next you see him.'

'When will that be?' Elsie said. 'I haven't seen him for ages.'

'Come over and watch the World Cup on the television with us.' Margarete looked at Elsie from the corner of her eye. 'But I should warn you, he has asked Dieter, too.' Her sister and Dieter had not seen each other since Dieter had broken off their engagement, and Margarete thought it might be too soon for Elsie.

Much to Margarete's surprise, Elsie said she would join them. She must have been emboldened by the fact that she'd survived the protest. But Margarete wished she hadn't been so hasty. Although she thought the meeting would be cathartic for her sister, she was frightened about the recently healed wounds that might be split open again. Scars — everyone seemed to have them. Yet it seemed she and her sisters had more to contend with than most.

Chapter 39

Saturday 30 July 1966

Elsie

Despite Elsie stepping to the side to avoid the crowd of lads in England scarves coming towards her, one of them still managed to knock her arm as he passed by. The strap on her bag slid to her elbow and she hoisted it back up. The young man turned with his hands in the air and said, 'Sorry, sorry,' blushing when he looked at her.

She wished men wouldn't keep doing that. Last week she'd bumped into another barrister she'd first met years ago and thought — hoped — they might have an interesting, intellectual conversation. Instead, he'd stammered and stuttered so much that she'd needed to wipe her new spectacles when she'd made her excuses and got away from him.

When she studied her face in the mirror, she couldn't make out what all the fuss was about. Of course, she knew she'd been blessed with symmetrical features, bright blue eyes and clear skin. But that was nothing more than the luck of the draw. She wanted others to see beyond that, but Dieter had been the only man to do so. Her stomach gnawed when she thought about him, which was on and off all day, every day. She missed him, but he'd made his decision and she could not do the one thing he'd asked of her to resolve the situation — convert to Judaism.

They'd discussed it endlessly, with some of those conversations becoming heated. 'But why should I have to convert?' she'd said. 'I'm already Jewish.'

'No, you're not,' Dieter answered. 'You were christened in the Church of England. You told me that yourself.'

'But my mother was Jewish, that should count for something.'

'Maybe,' Dieter said, exhausted from the backwards and forwards. 'Let's talk to the rabbi.'

But all that achieved was learning that Dieter was correct. Of course he was. He'd never strayed — or been pulled away — from the faith, so he knew much more about the ins and outs of it than she did. Also, his job as a teacher at the King David High School, where Kurt was headmaster, ensured he kept up with his knowledge of scripture and Judaic law.

At Waterloo, she bought a ticket for Woking to join Margarete and Kurt for the big game. Judith and Hugh would be there, too, with the baby. Elsie thought that the clerk, who had dyed red hair coiled in a bun, was Jewish. The woman smiled as she handed Elsie her change and she almost blurted out, 'How do you negotiate your way around all the rules and rituals of your faith?'

But the woman might not have been practising at all. Or she might have been a cultural Jew, which was a lifestyle Elsie initially thought she could maintain. Dieter, however, had wanted her conversion to be by the book and that meant learning Jewish theology, history, customs and culture. So she would have to take a course in basic Judaism alongside study with a rabbi, attendance at services and participation in home practice and synagogue. She felt worn out just thinking about the list.

She'd put off starting the process so many times that eventually Dieter had said over Friday dinner, 'You don't really want to convert, do you?'

'That's not fair,' she said. 'It's true I'm not all that keen but I'm willing to do it for you. For us.'

'Think about it seriously,' he said. 'The lessons are just the beginning. You will have to live the life for ever after we marry. Could you do that?'

She looked around at the carefully placed challah bread and board, the candlesticks, the salt, the cup and towel for washing hands, and knew she couldn't. The thought of it made her feel as hemmed in as she'd felt in the cupboard at the orphanage. 'Not yet,' she said. 'It's just that I don't believe in Judaism or Christianity or any other religion. But give me time. I'll get used to the idea.'

'I don't think you will,' Dieter said. 'And if you do, it won't last because both of us will become resentful. Therefore' — he reached across for her hand — 'I am going to call off our engagement in order to protect both of us. I'm so sorry, Elsie. I really do love you very much. But it won't work out.'

Elsie hung her head and stared at her plate in shock. As much as she couldn't imagine life without Dieter, she couldn't envisage living with the complexities of any religion. It seemed like an unnecessary burden to her and a waste of time and energy.

But what do I believe in? she asked herself now as she sat on the train. It was crowded with people who wanted to get home or to their local pub to

watch the big match. Some of them were behaving as if England had already won and they'd drunk a barrel or two of beer to celebrate. But she eventually found a seat and made herself comfortable. She reclined her head and shut her eyes. Whenever she was on a train, the fragmented images of the Kindertransport whirled through her mind, though no journey she'd undertaken since could be compared in any way. Then there had been nothing more than wooden benches to sit on with splinters that dug into the tops of their legs; cold blasts of air from around the chipped windows; scratchy blankets if you were lucky; a tag around your scrawny neck with a number written on it; a bit of bread and water; children trying to dig the lice out of their heads and others being sick or soiling themselves or crying for their non-existent mothers; and the menacing sound of bullying boots making their way straight towards them. Then there was the dread that oozed out of them. Margarete said it was visceral and if she'd had a knife she could have cut through it.

She turned her thoughts back to her question and the answer, she knew, was that she believed in the goodness of humanity. She didn't need or want a being — of whose existence she had no proof — to tell her how to be good or kind, caring or trustworthy. Human beings could do that all by themselves. Some of them slipped the net, and when they did their edicts and actions were beyond cruel and harmful and they needed to be dealt with, but ultimately she believed that goodness was inherent in everyone. And that was what she would say to Dieter should the topic come up again that afternoon.

* * *

It was good to see so many people crammed into the living room of her childhood home. The double-glazed French doors that had replaced the window had been flung open and, outside, a table was set for later. Bowls of crisps and peanuts, sandwiches, bottles of beer and pop were nestled on the low coffee table.

'Whose side are you on, Auntie Elsie?' Elijah asked her, his arm flung casually around a girl who looked at him adoringly through a long fringe. 'Are you going to hedge your bets by supporting both teams?'

Elsie snorted. 'I don't think so,' she said. 'I've never felt any affinity with Germany, and I'm quite sure the others of my generation don't either.'

‘It’s only football,’ said Jacob. ‘Not politics.’

Margarete caught Elsie’s attention and rolled her eyes.

‘There is no truth in either of those statements, Jacob,’ Elsie said sternly. ‘If it was *only* football then we wouldn’t be gathered here like this — and *everything* has to do with politics.’

‘There,’ Esther joined in. ‘That told you.’

Elsie made her way around the room, kissing everyone along the way. The baby — who was now a toddler of four — was running around clutching Kathe in his hand. She’d given it to him as a christening present and he seemed to love it as much as she had. The second Kathe had disappeared. She’d been quite sure Margarete had taken it with her when she’d left home, but she’d never asked and Margarete had never volunteered the information.

She hadn’t scanned the faces, but knew she was making her way towards Dieter and, despite trying to quell her feelings, her heart began to flutter and race. Perhaps they’d end up sitting next to each other. If England scored a goal he might turn and give her a hug, smell her hair, remember how it used to be. Then he’d ask to walk her to the bus, he would hold her hand and . . .

‘Elsie.’ She heard Dieter’s velvet voice softly say her name. ‘I’d like you to meet Talia.’ From behind his shoulder, a young, exotic-looking woman with a band around her dark hair smiled shyly. She held out her hand and said, ‘I’m pleased to meet you, Elsie.’

‘And you,’ Elsie managed to stammer.

The room that had faded into a blur around her suddenly and vividly came back to life. Everything looked lurid and cheap. The paper cups emblazoned with pictures of that silly lion wearing a Union Jack waistcoat — World Cup Willie, or whatever his name was. The cheap scarf shedding manmade fibres around little Henry’s neck; the prawn cocktail-flavoured crisps, Talia’s tiny hand in Dieter’s large palm, where hers should have been.

‘Here we go,’ Kurt said, rubbing his hands together.

‘Come on, England,’ Hugh called out. ‘You can do it, lads.’

Cheers went up for each England player who ran onto the pitch, followed by boos for the Germans. Margarete replenished the snacks and everyone had their eyes glued to the screen.

Elsie sat by herself on a straight-backed kitchen chair and tried to join in. Or at least to look as if she were enthusiastic, but it was beyond difficult. The whole thing was banal and ridiculous. The only thing she really paid attention to was Dieter and Talia. She didn't have to stare at them to be aware of their comments to each other that made them smile secretly. Dieter tenderly touched Talia on the nose and she giggled in return. They squeezed into an easy chair and sat as close together as was humanly possible. Elsie felt hot and trapped and found herself desperately wanting to escape, but not knowing how to go about it. Suddenly, she was a little girl confined to a cupboard once again. Sweat ran down her back and made her t-shirt stick to her skin.

Minutes or hours could have passed. There were shouts of joy and frustration and Elsie had no idea which side, if either, had scored. But she did notice that Talia helped herself freely to a sandwich and crisps. Judith turned to her a couple of times and their conversation seemed easier than it would be if they'd just met. Then it dawned on her that all of them, her entire family, must have met and socialised with Talia on more than one occasion. She felt her face colour when the betrayal hit her. Tears welled in her eyes and anger made her blood boil. She didn't know how she stopped herself from standing and shouting at all of them.

At that moment, Henry knocked over a cup of orange squash and started to cry. 'It's okay, poppet,' Judith said. 'I'll get a cloth.'

'Let me go,' Elsie said, glad of an opportunity to escape.

Margarete followed her to the kitchen and opened a drawer. 'The rags are in here,' she said. 'Elsie, I am sorry. I did not know that Dieter was going to bring—'

But Elsie couldn't keep it together any longer. She grabbed the cloth from Margarete's hand, turned on the hot tap and rounded on her sister. 'How could you?'

'Elsie.' Margarete had to raise her voice to be heard over the running water. 'Let me explain.'

'No need.' Elsie wrung out the rag and pushed it towards Margarete. 'How often have you said you've always wanted to take care of me? Now you can change that broken record, as you've done nothing of the sort this time. You've humiliated me in front of everyone.'

'Listen, Elsie. I think you are overreacting.'

‘Oh, do you?’ Elsie looked her straight in the eye. ‘Then you didn’t believe me when I told you how much Dieter meant to me and how my heart had been broken when he called off our engagement? I suppose you think I was overreacting then, too?’

Margarete threw the wet rag into the sink and covered her eyes with her hands. ‘I am sick and tired of being a fall-guy for this family,’ she said.

‘That’s right,’ Elsie flung back. ‘Turn it around so it’s all about you.’

‘Okay, we will get back to you, then. I am sorry about this situation, but either you or Dieter were always going to move on. It is not my fault he met someone first.’

Elsie picked up the cloth again and held it like a weapon. ‘You should have been the barrister,’ she said. ‘You’re very good at coming to your own defence. I’m not angry about that. I’m over him. I’m upset because you didn’t give me any warning about what I was walking into and because all of you have met her beforehand and seem to know her quite well. That is obvious.’

‘Well, as a barrister you should know that you have to give the accused a chance to speak. I am telling you again, I did not know that Dieter was going to bring Talia with him and we didn’t tell you because—’

A deafening roar made them stop in their tracks. The kitchen door flew open and Elijah stood in it with his fists in the air. ‘We did it!’ he shouted. ‘England won. You missed the goal of the century because you were in here having an argument. Give me that, Henry’s a mess.’ He took the cloth from Elsie and galloped out of the room.

Margarete and Elsie stood looking at each other. ‘We missed it,’ Margarete whispered.

Elsie nodded. *And so much more of the lovely life we could have together*, she thought. If only the three of them could stop bickering and blaming each other for every little thing that had gone wrong along the way and hang on to how much they really did mean to each other. ‘Margarete,’ she started, but Margarete had followed her son into the living room to celebrate with her family, leaving Elsie to dwell on how she was going to get past everyone while trying to hold her head up high.

Chapter 40

Monday 1 August 1966

Judith

What a dreadful scene on Saturday afternoon! I don't know what Talia or Elijah's young lady must think of our family. I hardly know what to make of them myself and poor little Henry was right in the middle of it through no fault of his own.

From my point of view, everything had been going so well. We were all excited about the match and, although it was England versus Germany, no one made any remarks about Hitler moustaches or goose steps. Of course I wouldn't have done that and nor would any of the adults, but I had been a bit worried about Margarete's children, who can get carried away sometimes with their clever banter.

Then Henry spilled his drink, Elsie went to get a cloth, Margarete followed her to the kitchen and the next thing we knew they were shouting and screaming at one another. The television set was on very loud and there was a lot of talking and cheering so it was difficult to hear, but I made out a few words like 'Talia', 'Dieter', 'humiliated' and 'overreacting'. I made a move to go and see if I could play referee, but Hugh put a hand on my arm and held me back. Then the game finished and so did the argument. Margarete came out of the kitchen as if nothing untoward had happened and soon after, Elsie slunk out of the house like a whipped dog.

If anyone mentioned the upset during the rest of the afternoon, I didn't hear them. We had tea outside and talked about the match, then Hugh and I headed for home. *Grown-ups*, I thought, *are so confusing*. But I'm an adult, too, and I didn't broach the subject with anyone. We all pretended that it hadn't happened.

'So what was that all about with your sisters?' Hugh had said when we were in the car.

I didn't want to say anything in front of Henry, who repeats everything he overhears. I wonder if he'll be an eavesdropper like I was. Perhaps he already is. That hadn't occurred to me before, but now that it has I'll remember to check that he's not listening when Hugh and I are having a

serious discussion or an argument. 'Wait until he's in bed,' I said, pointing at the little fellow.

'Wait for what?' Henry asked.

'See?' I said and Hugh laughed out loud.

'See what?' Henry strained to look out of the window.

Hugh and I had to hide our laughter so the conversation wouldn't carry on indefinitely in the same vein. I do wish Hugh and I shared more moments like that; it made me feel close to him again.

When Henry was settled, I explained to Hugh that I had no idea what the argument between my sisters had been about. 'But I think Elsie was accusing Margarete of humiliating her. I heard Talia's name mentioned.'

'Oh dear,' Hugh said. 'Here we go again. Another round of reproaches and finger-pointing. It's very tiring.'

'It wasn't anything to do with me,' I said, feeling a bit wounded.

'Well, not directly.' Hugh poured himself a whisky. 'Do you want one?' he asked.

'No, thank you.' I shook my head firmly. 'Horrible stuff.'

Hugh's insidious smile made him look as if he had a secret, but if he knew that I'd been drinking too much all those years ago, he must also know that I gave it up the minute I found out I was pregnant with Henry. Sometimes he makes my skin crawl.

'And whatever do you mean, "not directly"?''

'I advised many times that either you or Margarete should tell Elsie about Talia. She was bound to find out and I knew it would be very hurtful for her that her sisters had kept the information to themselves.' He put up his hands as if he was a complete innocent, then went into his office to do the accounts and that was the end of that. Now I have proof that he never listens to me because I definitely told him that Margarete and I were convinced it wouldn't last, so we decided not to hurt Elsie with the information. And how many times do we have to say we had no idea that Dieter was going to bring Talia along?

Well, I don't know if I want to get involved in all of this any more than I already am. I've got more important things to do like Hoover the house, pick up Henry from nursery and get the dinner sorted out before the evening surgery. But there's the doorbell and I'll have to see who it is.

It was Margarete, looking haggard and every bit her almost forty years. There were a few strands of grey amidst her dark hair, and no trace of the red lipstick she usually wears.

Before I had time to shut the door Margarete said, 'Judith, I am very worried about Elsie.'

I should have known she hadn't called on me for a cup of coffee and a social visit — she never does. 'Why?' I said, more coldly than I'd meant to.

'She is not answering her telephone,' Margarete said. The panic in her voice made me think of how we'd felt all those years ago when we'd clawed around in the cold and dark looking for her after she'd run away. 'I cannot get in contact with her.'

'Come and sit down. I'll put on the kettle.'

Margarete balanced on the edge of the sofa.

'It's Monday morning,' I said. 'She's probably in chambers.'

'But there was no reply Saturday night or yesterday.' Margarete sounded desperate. 'We must try to find her.'

I waited for my sister to take a sip of coffee before I said anything else. 'Elsie is a big girl now, Margarete,' I said. 'She doesn't have to answer her telephone if she doesn't want to.'

'You do not understand,' Margarete said.

'No, I don't understand your argument with Elsie, if that's what you mean.'

Margarete plumped a cushion and put it behind her back. 'That was not what I meant,' she said. 'I was referring to the way I have always tried to take care of—'

I held up my hand and that made Margarete stop her overused, innocuous-sounding rhetoric in its tracks. 'That's well and truly in the past now,' I said. 'You have to let that go. Elsie and I had to do that when you left us.'

Margarete's eyes widened so much that I could see little pink blood vessels threading through the whites. She sat up straight again and shook her head. 'But you obviously have not,' she said. 'You have brought that incident up time and time again. You are like a dog with a bone.'

I put down my cup before Margarete could see how it was rattling around in its saucer. 'Oh, why did I listen to you when you said we should hide Dieter and Talia's relationship from Elsie?'

‘Now it is my fault again, is it?’ Margarete took a tissue from her handbag and blew her nose.

‘That makes a change, it’s usually mine.’

‘I thought we made the decision together,’ Margarete huffed.

There was a soft shuffle from the hallway as a letter landed on the mat and a crunch on the gravel driveway as a car turned into the adjacent surgery.

We both sat back at the same moment as if we’d gone ten rounds in a boxing ring and come out defeated. At last Margarete said, ‘It was wrong not to tell Elsie, I know that now.’

‘Perhaps we made the wrong decision for the right reasons?’ I offered.

‘Yes, that is a good way of putting it.’

‘When Dieter and Talia arrived, I did try to ring Elsie,’ Margarete said mournfully. ‘But she’d already left for our house.’

She looked so distracted and upset that my heart softened towards her. Perhaps I’d been too cutting. ‘I’m sorry.’ I reached for her hand, which she pressed. ‘Do you want me to explain the misunderstanding to Elsie if I speak to her?’

Margarete was delighted with that suggestion. ‘If you would,’ she said. ‘And tell her to call me.’

I didn’t have to wait long as the doorbell buzzed again and there stood Elsie. I was surprised she and Margarete hadn’t passed on the path. She looked as if she’d been crying as she threw herself into my arms. ‘Oh, Judith,’ she said in a croaky voice. ‘I made such a fool of myself on Saturday.’

This time I made tea and Elsie sat in the hollow Margarete had sculpted out of the sofa cushion a quarter of an hour before.

Elsie wiped her spectacles and, when she put them back on, her eyes seemed a more crystalline blue than usual. It was beyond me how Dieter could have ever let her go. Any other man would have been tripping over himself to keep her, but I suppose that was evidence of Dieter’s deep faith. Even so, I wanted to shake him until he came to his senses.

‘If it helps,’ I said. ‘Talia isn’t a patch on you. And you’ll soon find someone a million times better.’

‘That’s not what I’m upset about,’ Elsie said. ‘My issue is with Margarete — and you.’

My hand flew to my chest. There I was, trying to be so kind and sympathetic. ‘Me?’ I said. ‘What have I done?’

‘Neither of you told me about Talia,’ Elsie said in a clear, decisive voice. It was how I thought she must sound in court.

‘Margarete was here earlier,’ I said. ‘She was beside herself because she hasn’t been able to get in touch with you.’

Elsie raised her eyebrows and shrugged.

‘She . . . we . . . want you to know that we got caught up in trying to protect you. Margarete didn’t think we would ever have to say anything and I blindly followed her lead. It was silly of us and I’m sorry.’

Elsie acquiesced with a small nod.

‘As for Saturday, Margarete tried to telephone and tell you Talia was with Dieter, but you had already left your house. It was too late to give you the heads-up.’

Elsie looked down at the tea she hadn’t touched. ‘Neither of you thought of walking to the train station to meet me or making sure you caught me at the door or calling me into another room or passing me a note? You tried, I’ll give you that. But you didn’t try anywhere near hard enough.’

With that, she picked up her bag and slammed out of the house. All I could do was stare after her. I rang Margarete and told her the whole story, but cut short any further conversation that might have ensued by saying I had to collect Henry. I can’t go into it any more today. I feel exhausted and there’s still the cleaning to deal with or else Hugh will ask me what I’ve been doing all day. The thought of telling him everything that’s happened fills me with dread. He won’t listen and he won’t comfort me. It’s a wonder I haven’t started drinking again.

Chapter 41

Saturday 25 December 1976

Elsie

Elsie wasn't quite convinced that Christmas was the right time to introduce the Professor to her family.

'But you've known him for . . . how long?' Judith had asked. 'Six months?'

'Seven,' Elsie answered.

'That's even worse, then. And you're practically living together.'

'I wouldn't say that. I'm not giving up my little house and my freedom quite so easily.'

Judith looked at her sister through the tops of her new bifocals. 'How many nights did he spend with you last week? Be honest.'

'Six,' Elsie said, smiling to herself as she remembered those cosy evenings and heady nights between the sheets. 'I made him go home on Sunday so I would look fresh for Monday morning.'

Since she'd met the Professor on a training course to update human rights barristers on new developments, she'd tried to keep her relationship with him a secret. At her age, she couldn't believe the number of times she let herself gaze into the distance and think about how he moved his hands during a lecture or the way his white hair sprang up when he took off his hat or the way he never looked at her as if she were an ageing Doris Day. He was older than her by almost twenty years and had made it clear straight away that his three grown-up daughters were enough for him. 'That suits me just fine,' she told him. 'Children have never featured in my life plans.'

'How about a steely-haired, boyish, bookish husband?' the Professor asked, draining a second bottle of wine into her glass.

'We'll see about that,' Elsie said, thrilled to be asked such a question by a man who was everything she wanted.

'Or a lover then.' The Professor fondled her forearm gently across the table.

'Now that sounds perfect,' she said.

But Judith and Margarete had known something was different and niggled constantly until exhaustion and excitement had overtaken her and

she'd told them everything. From that moment on, they harassed her endlessly about arranging a meeting until they were on the verge of Christmas and Judith had invited the whole family — which she insisted included the Professor.

'I introduced Paul to everyone right away,' Judith said. 'I wanted him to feel part of the family.'

'And you did the same with Martin and look how that turned out. He took one look at us and we haven't seen his heels for dust since.'

Judith sniffed with displeasure. 'He was a rebound after Hugh. You know that. And it wasn't all of you, he said in the end he didn't think he could bring up another man's child. Paul's much better.'

Elsie agreed with that. Paul was very good for Judith and Henry, who he hoped would take over the running of his building company one day. He was a rather squat, sturdy man whose laugh always seemed to be waiting — right under the surface of his cheerful exterior — to emerge at the slightest hint of an amusing remark or story. He was nothing like the type of man Elsie had ever imagined for Judith; Hugh had been, but underneath his suave exterior he'd been bullish and controlling, and she hoped he was hating every minute with the veterinary nurse he'd gone off with.

'So is it yes or no?' Judith cornered her. 'I need to know for numbers.'

Elsie took a deep breath and said, 'Yes, heaven help me.'

The Professor laughed when she told him her concerns about the family Christmas dinner. 'Elsie,' he said, putting down his newspaper and smiling. 'I'm sixty-one years old with three daughters and a divorce behind me. I'll be fine and it will be marvellous. Besides, you told me that this has been a good year for you and your sisters. No major arguments or upsets.'

'Let's hope it lasts for the final days of 1976. A lot can happen in that time.'

* * *

Elsie loved being driven in the Professor's silver Porsche Classic. She adored the way the leather seats cradled her back and bottom, the way the Professor caressed the steering wheel and turned the dials on the radio, the stares from other motorists or from people standing at bus stops, soaking wet and miserable. She knew it was all superficial nonsense, but couldn't she be a serious barrister and have a little bit of fun at the same time? Years

ago when she was a child, that was all she'd craved — fun and happy moments. In some vague, childish way, she'd questioned the reasons why she and Margarete had suffered Kristallnacht and the Kindertransport if not to enjoy life afterwards to some degree. And she thought the same could pertain to her now that she had met someone like the Professor after all these years — the fact that he happened to have a silver Porsche was a luxurious bonus.

But wait, she thought. *Don't get carried away*. It had taken years for her to build her reputation in her chosen profession. She was good in court and still believed vehemently in what she did and why. She would have to temper herself and learn to balance the various aspects of her life — a lesson she'd never learned when it had come to Dieter.

'All right?' the Professor asked her, his hand over hers.

'I'm okay now,' she said. 'Let's wait and see when we get there.'

The tiny back seat and boot were filled with tasteful presents they'd bought together at Harrods and Selfridges. It had been a revelation to her that getting the purchases gift-wrapped while they sipped a glass of champagne relieved her of so much stress. She'd never thought of it before, although she could have easily afforded it.

'How are you going to introduce me?' The Professor asked. 'Whatever you call me now is going to stick.'

He was talking about their future together. That made a lovely warm glow — not unlike the one that had burned inside her when Margarete had first said they were sisters — ignite in her chest.

'The Professor is my special name for you. It's something intimate between us.' She smiled knowingly at him.

'And oh, how I love the way you use it.' He brought her fingers to his mouth and kissed them. 'So — Charles Edward Authbert it is,' the Professor said.

'Perhaps I'll make them call you Sir Charles. At least for a little while.'

The Professor cringed. 'You know how I hate all that pomposity,' he said. 'I'll tell them to call me Charlie.'

'Or Chuck.' Elsie warmed to the idea. 'With the increasing influence from across the pond I think that would be very apt.'

They stopped at traffic lights and watched a family crossing the road towards a church on the opposite side. That was another thing that endeared

the Professor to her. He didn't believe in any of that religion nonsense either.

* * *

Paul had finished the extension on the back of Judith's house in time for all of them to have Christmas dinner in the bright, open space. Which was just as well as there would be seventeen and a half of them — including Dieter and Talia and their two boys and the baby that Elijah's wife, Diana, was expecting — sitting down together. Margarete and Esther were putting out Christmas crackers when Elsie and Charles arrived, but stopped when they walked into the room. Everyone suspended their activities for a moment and in that split second Elsie imagined they were thinking that the Professor was older than they thought he'd be. Or better dressed or more full of ready smiles. 'I'd like to introduce all of you to Charles Authbert,' Elsie said shyly. 'He's my . . .'

Elsie felt a blush wash over her face as everyone waited to find out how she would describe the Professor. She felt ridiculous, as if she were a fourteen-year-old with a crush on one of her teachers.

'Elsie's special friend,' the Professor said, extending his hand. 'As they used to say during the war.'

That broke the ice and everyone reached to shake Charles's hand. Her special friend handed Paul a beautifully wrapped box of half a dozen bottles of champagne, which he oohed and aahed over. 'I may call on your assistance to help with uncorking these,' Paul said. 'I'm not used to such indulgences.'

Elsie saw Charles glance at the Breitling on Paul's wrist before he said, 'It would be my pleasure.'

They put their gifts under the tree with the others and Elsie left Charles to chat with the men while she helped to lay out the cutlery that had once belonged to Mum and Dad. 'I remember these. Do you, Margarete?'

Margarete looked across and studied the knife and fork Elsie was holding for a few moments. 'Yes,' she said. 'Mrs Kingfisher used to bring them out on special occasions. Like Christmas and Easter.'

A blast of hot, steamy air laced with the smells of turkey, brussels sprouts and brandy butter hit them when Judith opened the kitchen door to

bring through a pile of plates. 'I'll put those out, Auntie Judith,' Esther said, her long brown hair swinging down her back.

'Thank you, my love,' Judith said. 'Henry can help you. Henry,' she called at the top of her voice. 'Put down that tape recorder thing and give your cousin a hand.'

'That's right,' Elsie said. 'Birthdays, too, and Mum and Dad's anniversary.'

'I asked once or twice if we could use them for Hanukkah, but Mum said no and made me lay the table with a cheap set we used every day of the week.' Margarete shook her head. She wore spectacles now too, and because she'd had her grey hair cropped her ears were more prominent than they'd been for years.

Elsie's heart felt as though it would break in half. That was her sister, and the sight of her brought back memories of how comforted she had been whenever she'd looked at Margarete's dear face. *But was that true?* Elsie wondered. She had no recollection of that at all and, if it had been the case, surely she would have remembered. Although they hadn't spoken about their childhoods for some time now, it often crossed her mind that Margarete embellished the stories of the rifts she'd had with Mum — or perhaps Elsie had been so young she'd forgotten or hadn't noticed, or so worried she might lose her own pampered lifestyle if she complained on Margarete's behalf that she'd turned a blind eye.

Her spectacles fogged over annoyingly as she helped Judith pile roast potatoes, carrots and parsnips into serving bowls. Judith leaned across the sink and opened the kitchen window. 'I didn't factor in hot flushes when I volunteered to host today,' she said.

'Here, let me help,' Elsie said, fanning her sister with a tea towel.

Judith laughed. 'You don't know how lovely that feels.' The minute Margarete left the room, Judith said, 'I do hope she isn't going to start with the "poor me" scenarios today. I think that would just about do me in.'

'I don't think she will,' Elsie said. 'She didn't bring up Hanukkah and the cutlery, I did. She merely responded. But is it true?'

When Judith turned to look at her, mascara was smudged under her eyes and a strand of hair was stuck to her forehead. 'Yes.' She nodded. 'She tried so hard to keep the Jewish faith alive in both your hearts.'

'I don't remember,' Elsie whispered.

‘You were so small,’ Judith said. ‘But I knew and I didn’t help.’

Elsie put down the tea towel and took Judith in her arms. ‘You were small, too,’ she said. ‘And grown-ups were so confusing to us then.’

‘Still are,’ Judith said. ‘Let’s get this lot on the table before it gets cold.’

They all closed their eyes and held hands while Paul said a prayer and Kurt followed with a blessing. Then they all talked over each other at once, passing dishes backwards and forwards and commenting on champagne bubbles going up their noses.

‘Cheers to us,’ Margarete said, looking pointedly at each of her sisters in turn. ‘It’s been a good year.’ Everyone agreed.

‘Let’s hope it continues into 1977,’ Judith said.

‘Yes, let’s. Anything positive to look forward to?’ the Professor asked.

Diana smoothed her dress over her bump and Elijah rested his hand on it tenderly.

‘Of course,’ Charles said. ‘Raise your glasses to the next generation, please.’

‘Tell them, Mum,’ Henry said. ‘You said you would today.’

‘I’ll do the honours.’ Paul stood and held up his glass again. ‘Judith has agreed to be my wife,’ he said. ‘Date to be announced soon.’

There were claps on the back and Dieter shouted, ‘Are you sure you know what you’re taking on, Paul? She’s a force to be reckoned with.’

Paul held up his hands to hush them. ‘All I can say is, I’ll give it my best shot.’

‘I’m going to join a kibbutz in Israel for the summer,’ Esther said. ‘Does that count?’

‘It certainly does,’ Talia said. ‘Shalom.’

‘And Kurt and I are hoping to visit old friends in California for a month or so,’ Margarete added.

‘That’s wonderful for you,’ Elsie said. ‘But do be careful. It’s a long trip and I’ve heard it gets so hot there.’

‘After all we have been through, Liebling?’ Margarete replied.

Everyone grew quiet and either looked down at their empty plates or at each other, waiting to hear what would unfold between the sisters. Elsie could almost see the lumps gathering in their throats.

She reached across the discarded paper hats and tacky toys and picked up a mince pie. ‘Do you remember the first time we smelled and tasted one of these?’ she said softly. ‘It was our first Christmas with the Kingfishers. We didn’t understand a word of English and didn’t have a clue what was going on. When Mum offered us one, we thought she’d called them “mint spies”.’

Henry laughed. ‘Brilliant. I’m going to call them that from now on,’ he said.

‘And we had never tasted anything so wonderful,’ Margarete said. ‘The buttery pastry, the spices, the soft dried fruits. We had to wipe the drool from our chins.’

Elsie ceremoniously placed the pie in Margarete’s palm. ‘Danke schön, meine Schwester,’ she said, her voice trembling. ‘You deserve everything and so much more for getting me here.’ Then she turned and passed another to Judith. ‘And thank you, our sister, for welcoming us into your life and never failing us.’

The sun had set and, in the light from the candles, Elsie could see that tears were coursing down Margarete’s cheeks. Everyone around them had joined in, but somehow the occasion didn’t seem melancholy or sorrowful. Judith stretched out her hands. Elsie and Margarete grabbed onto them and they stood, clinging to each other without saying a word. It felt as if the three of them had been reunited after a very long time apart.

Chapter 42

Saturday 23 April 1977

Judith

What a beautiful wedding. I cannot get over just how wonderful the day has been. Elsie looked more gorgeous than any bride half her age and I don't know how she manages it. She wore a fitted, cream-coloured suit with a floppy hat trimmed in bright purple and pink flowers to match her bouquet. Esther was her maid of honour, Kurt gave her away and Margarete and I were witnesses.

She was wearing a pair of those new contact lenses and had to walk up and down steps very carefully, but whoever was near held her arm and she managed to avoid tripping up and embarrassing herself. More often than not that someone was Charles, who couldn't take his eyes off her. He looked smart, too, in his black velvet evening suit and bow tie. On his side, his daughters and their husbands and children attended along with a sister and her son.

After the photos, we all went to the Savoy for the wedding breakfast, drinks and speeches. Unbeknown to anyone, Charles had asked Elijah to play 'And I Love Her' on the violin, and it was such a sublime, soaring rendition that it took the guests a few moments to gather their emotions and clap their approval. It was perfect and I suppose it should have been, given he's a professional musician.

We're home now with a cup of tea each and Paul's sitting opposite me in his favourite chair. 'Do you think our wedding will be just as lovely?' I asked him.

He crossed his legs and I saw the hole in the sole of his sock. 'Paul,' I said. 'Your socks.'

'What?' He looked most offended. 'They match my suit, don't they?'

'I keep telling you, there's no need to always dress as if you're on a building site.'

He smiled at me over his mug of tea. 'Sorry,' he said. 'They were fine when I put them on.'

'Well, do you think our big day will be as fantastic?'

‘Of course it will,’ he said. ‘It’ll be us, so it will be much more exciting.’

I do hope he’s right. It’s only four months away and I’m in a frenzy of preparation. There’s the cake to order, entertainment to think about, our outfits to buy, the vicar to be consulted, the venue to be finalised. I wonder how Elsie managed hers so effortlessly. The only thing I can tick off my list is the honeymoon — Paul’s arranging that, but it would be lovely to do something like Charles organised for Elsie — a road trip through the Riviera. So continental and sophisticated.

‘Let’s have a nightcap, shall we?’ Paul yawned. ‘Then I’ll be on my way. One thing I’ll be glad of when we get married is not having to make the journey between our houses. It’s very tiring.’

It seems so silly to maintain separate accommodation for the sake of propriety. We sleep together every chance we get and, when Henry visits Hugh on some weekends, Paul stays the entire time. But I insist we continue the arrangement for Henry’s sake. I don’t think living with someone before marriage sets a good precedent. Oh, I know that a lot of people do cohabit out of wedlock — as Elsie and Charles did up until today — but I want to keep my Henry on the straight and narrow, so that boils down to us leading by example.

‘I’m going to stick with tea,’ I said. ‘Perhaps you should, too, as you have to drive?’

‘One little one won’t hurt,’ he said. ‘I know the roads like the back of my hand.’ Then he yawned, beat his chest like Tarzan — which is very endearing — and changed his mind.

He settled down again and looked so drawn and tired that I was almost tempted to change my mind this once. But I know that will lead to twice and thrice and before you know it he’ll have moved in. Besides, waiting will make living together full-time after the wedding so much more meaningful.

Who would have imagined that both Elsie and I would be getting married at this time in our lives? Margarete and I had often spoken about how we’d thought Elsie would get married young, mainly because she was so beautiful that men were attracted to her like bees to flowers. She’d told me years ago that she was looking for someone who was intellectual, driven, kind, understanding and good fun. Dieter had ticked every box, but

this diary knows full well the outcome to that love story. It took her a long time to get over him and I did wonder if she ever would. Then at long last Charles came on the scene and she hasn't looked back. I didn't think she'd go for someone that much older, but she'd never wanted children — another shock to me — so he fitted in perfectly with that plan, too. Was that what she'd done after the Dieter debacle? Mapped out a plan for herself and stuck to it? I wouldn't be surprised if she had.

And while I'm writing about unimaginable phenomena, I had Margarete and Kurt down to last less than a year. But here they are, about to celebrate their thirtieth wedding anniversary with three adult children and a grandchild to show for it. They seem very happy and content together. I agree with Kurt when he nags Margarete about taking a degree, or at least some academic qualifications, but she always shakes her head adamantly and says no university would want someone from her background. Elsie and I have discussed it with her endlessly, but I'm going to try again. She's wasted pottering around the house and garden.

I can hear Henry in the kitchen, opening cupboards and drawers and the refrigerator. No matter how much food I give him, he's still hungry. There, he's just shouted out about a sandwich.

'Help yourself,' I called back. 'But please tidy up afterwards.'

'Yes, Mum,' he said in a hangdog tone of voice.

That was so easy. My son is hungry, and I have food to feed him. I often think about Margarete, Elsie and the other Kindertransport children who knew nothing other than griping hunger. It must have been terrible for them. But during the war, none of us were permanently full up, were we? The rations became more meagre as time went on and the food more unpalatable. Thinking about those weird and wonderful concoctions definitely does not make me feel nostalgic. Savoury potato biscuits; corned beef fritters; bread and apple pudding; mock brains. They were a few of the delicacies we wolfed down because we were hungry and there was nothing else. A prune and root vegetable casserole? It turns my stomach now, but at the time we longed for second helpings. Youngsters now, with their Wimpy burgers and late-night sandwiches don't have any understanding of what it was like and I'm glad — I wouldn't want Henry to go through what we endured. And we were three of the lucky ones.

Mum's Dig for Victory! garden helped a lot. I have the article about her and her vegetable plot somewhere. She looked beautiful in the photograph — fresh and young and slim. I must find it and show it to Henry, he'd love to see it.

I was about to ask Paul what his favourite foods were during the war, but he got up to leave so I'll bring the subject up another time. We kissed and cuddled at the door and he almost dozed off on my shoulder. 'Call when you get home, okay?' I said.

'As always,' he answered, halfway down the drive. 'Love you.'

He did look so weary. He's worked so hard to get where he is and he's given Henry the wonderful opportunity of joining the business in due course — as if he's his own son. It's given Henry a focus for his schoolwork, too, as he's talking about taking business studies and accounting to help Paul with the side of things that he's not very keen on himself.

I can't believe how everything is working out for us. When I look back now, I realise just how difficult life was with Hugh. I think I knew it at the time but didn't want to admit to myself that I'd made a terrible mistake. On paper he was the ideal husband or an imaginary ideal I'd conjured up. He was tall, handsome, funny, had a good degree and loved animals. I thought I'd fallen on my feet when he fell for me. Then he began to chip away at my confidence. He criticised my relationships with Mum and my sisters and I wonder now if he wanted to drive a wedge between me and them. I've read about some men who do that. Then there were his expectations of me as a housewife. 'You're only working in the practice part-time,' he would say. 'Isn't a clean flat the least I can expect?'

And I can't forget our poor, dear little Elsa. Hugh didn't blame me at the time, but later he alluded to how he thought I could have done something — anything — to stop the cord wrapping itself around the baby's neck. Wriggled onto my side or stood up or screamed louder, but as I lay helpless on the hospital bed it was all I could do to follow the doctors' instructions. I found his attitude very hard to take because he'd seen the same thing happen to puppies and kittens and he never blamed the mother. I raised that analogy with him, but all he said was, 'Don't compare yourself to a dog, Judith.'

It was the lowest point in my life and I let the sherry get to me. Every time I took that first sip I felt better, but by the time I was staring into the bottom of the bottle I was wretched. And the next day it was the same all over again. I think it must be genetic, but Elsie and Margarete think it's learned behaviour. Whichever, I'm so glad I've put that terrible habit to bed, although I have started to drink a bit now that I feel relaxed and happy with Paul. He likes a drink, and it feels right to join him for a few. We did have rather a lot today what with the champagne and wine and port. We get on so well with Charles and we accepted graciously when he kept pressing filled glasses into our hands. Well, it's okay. Today was a one-off special occasion and it probably won't happen again until our wedding in August. But thinking about it makes me want to have another and why not? In fact, I will. Not because I'm unhappy this time. Just the opposite. I want to celebrate and there's no better way than with a small drink or two. It's not like last time when I drank as compensation, now I'm settled and happy and content and alcohol will not get the better of me. Nothing will.

Chapter 43

Friday 25 August 1978

Margarete

Judith wasn't speaking to Elsie and Elsie wasn't speaking to Judith. It didn't seem to matter that all three of them had stood in solidarity with mince pie peace offerings in their hands eighteen months ago, Elsie was disgusted with Judith's drinking and had told her so in no uncertain terms. Then, of all things, Judith blamed Elsie and Charles for starting her off again by plying her with so much alcohol at their wedding, when everyone knew she'd started drinking with Paul before that. As a consequence, Margarete was on her own to meet Judith for lunch to mark her sister's first anniversary.

'Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?' Kurt asked, his face crumpled with concern.

'No.' Margarete shook her head. 'It would only complicate matters.'

'I never thought I was the one making things difficult.'

Margarete smiled at him fondly. It had worked out well between them. 'It is never you, Kurt,' she said. 'But what with the drink and tears and accusations, well, you know what I mean.'

'I'm afraid I do,' Kurt said. 'Are you hoping to get the chance to suggest counselling to her? It's done wonders for you.'

Margarete groaned. 'I have been trying to raise the subject with her for weeks, but fingers crossed, an opportunity might present itself today. You know I have been taking the softly, softly approach with her. If I do not, she might close herself off from me as well, then no one will be keeping an eye on her.'

'Well, there is Paul. And Henry.'

'They are doing the best they can, I am sure. But Paul told me she cuts them off for days at a time, too.'

Kurt nodded his head. 'That's hard,' he said. 'Is Paul still not drinking in front of her?'

'No, he swears he is not.'

'Good on him,' Kurt said. 'At least he's trying.'

Judith had wanted Margarete to go to her house, but Judith spent so much time shut up inside that Margarete thought she should try to get out

for a few hours. That also meant they'd get a decent meal as her sister's cupboards were bare more often than not. She tried to stock them every week so Henry would have something to eat besides the baked beans and tomato soup that Paul brought home, but he had a main meal at school and spent some weekends with Hugh and, judging by the way he was growing, he certainly wasn't starving.

Judith had reluctantly agreed to meet her at a new restaurant in Woking but she'd said, 'I don't want to be too long. For some reason or another I get very tired at the moment.'

I know the reason, Margarete wanted to scream at her. *It's called overindulgence. Why can you not admit to yourself that your drinking is out of control?* But instead of that, she said, 'Perhaps if you had fewer glasses of—'

Judith huffed. 'Don't you start,' she said. 'I know my limits and I'm well within them.'

But she wasn't — that much was obvious. Although she knew it wasn't a good time, Margarete had ploughed ahead and raised the question of their sister again. 'Shall I ask Elsie to join us?' she asked.

Judith aimed daggers at Margarete. 'Are you mad?' she said, pouring herself another vodka. That was her drink of choice now because it was harder to detect on the breath. 'First she forces me to drink, then she has a go at me about it. I can't win. So no, I don't want you to invite Elsie. She's turned into such a nag and a spoilsport. All she wants to do, for some reason or another, is ruin things for me.'

'Really, Judith, I think your reasoning is illogical and incorrect.'

'Don't talk to me about logic.' Judith looked at her through glazed eyes. 'What's happened to your own? Oh yes, I remember. You don't have any because you never had a chance to go to university. Boo hoo for you.'

Margarete burned with hurt and wounded pride. Judith had slung insults like that at her many times during the last year — and hurled the same or worse at Elsie — so it was getting harder and harder to have patience or to know how to manage the situation.

She'd left the house early enough to walk and now, when she looked at the hazy blue sky and listened to the birds, she was glad she had. Almost everyone she passed wore brightly coloured clothes in psychedelic or block-print patterns that seemed to match the colours of the trees and

flowers. With the help of Esther and her daughter-in-law, Diana, she'd been brave enough to pick out an orange, pink and pale blue blouse — its long, puffy sleeves disguising the wobbly flesh on her upper arms — and a knee-length skirt patterned in black-and-white squares. But today she wore the same lilac suit and shoes she'd worn to Judith's wedding, hoping the outfit might remind them both of the lovely day it had been.

She passed The Cricketers, where Judith had told her she used to meet Elsie before they visited Mum in the nursing home. It had recently been refurbished and the tables outside were packed with people laughing and raising beer glasses to their smiling mouths. It looked like a haven and Margarete so wished she could call Kurt from a telephone box and ask him to meet her there so they could while away the afternoon talking about everything and nothing, without a care in the world.

How, Margarete wondered, had Judith got this story about Elsie and Charles so firmly stuck in her head?

'But Judith,' Elsie had said in desperation. 'Charles and I didn't hold the glass to your mouth and force you to drink.'

'Oh, stop playing the barrister, that's so pedantic. Every time I looked, Charles was encouraging both Paul and me with another bottle of something he said we'd love and you . . . you did nothing to stop your husband.'

The conversation had stopped there.

'I'm not going to give up,' Elsie said to Margarete. 'Although I should for my own sanity.'

'Nor will I,' Margarete said. 'She never gave up on me and I must remember that.'

But Judith banned Elsie from contacting her, going so far as to refuse to open the door to her sister and hanging up when she called on the phone. That was hard for all of them, but particularly for Margarete, who had to take the brunt of it. And the escalating amount of alcohol intake only added fuel to Judith's raging fire.

From across the road, Margarete could make out Judith sitting at a window table. She was dressed in a rather dull, navy-blue shift dress and jacket and had a large glass of clear liquid — which definitely wouldn't be water — in her hand. If she kept going at this rate, she'd be well and truly sloshed by the time she and Paul had their celebration that evening. Without

knowing Margarete was studying her, she looked small and sad and frail. Not at all happy, as she claimed to be. Margarete closed her eyes for a moment and felt pity engulf her.

‘Hello,’ Margarete said, kissing Judith on her waxy cheek. ‘It is lovely here. I hope you think so, too?’ She twirled around gracelessly. ‘Do you remember my outfit?’

Judith shrugged, then turned to take in her surroundings. Artificial vines were draped over pictures on the walls and the seats were covered in a bright red material. There was a rosebud in a vase on each table and Margarete brought theirs to her nose and sniffed. ‘It is real,’ she said. ‘I did not think it would be.’

‘I had yellow roses in my bouquet.’ Judith tried to sound light-hearted.

‘You looked beautiful,’ Margarete said.

That mustered a wan smile from Judith and, for a split second, she looked so lost and confused that Margarete longed to take her in her arms and comfort her.

The moment passed, though, when a waitress came to the table and asked if they were ready to order.

‘I won’t be eating. Just another of these.’ Judith held up her glass. ‘But please make it a double. And my . . . sister will have the same.’

Margarete stared at her menu without really seeing it. Shame and anger made her feel hot and uncomfortable. ‘Can we have another minute or two?’ she asked. ‘Judith.’ She leaned across the table so other customers couldn’t hear her. ‘You must eat something. I am going to insist.’

Judith looked the other way, her empty glass in her hand.

‘If you cannot do it for yourself or Paul or me, do it for Henry.’

That caught Judith’s attention and she turned her gaze back toward Margarete. ‘I’ve tried to do everything for that boy,’ she mumbled. ‘But now I’m so . . .’

‘You have done a marvellous job.’ Margarete thought she might be getting through to her sister at last. ‘Do not give up on him now. Remember, he desperately needs you. He is floundering and he has lost his way a bit. Do you remember he is in a dilemma about what to study next?’

Judith looked surprised, her forehead creasing as she tried to recall what was going on with her son. ‘I know, I know.’ She suddenly nodded her head. ‘It was Business, but now he’s talking about Law . . .’

‘Like Elsie,’ Margarete couldn’t help but add.

‘Or accounting in Paul’s construction company.’

‘Yes,’ Margarete encouraged her sister. ‘He desperately needs your guidance. And . . .’ Margarete hesitated and then continued, very gently. ‘I understand that Hugh keeps making snide remarks about Henry going to live with him.’ Margarete paused to let that sink in.

Judith was impatient and flustered and seemed to have lost the momentum she needed to be on the defensive. She covered her mouth with her hands and her cloudy eyes misted with tears. ‘Am I that bad, Margarete?’ she mumbled. ‘Tell me the truth.’

Margarete was overcome with pity and admiration for her sister. It was all she could do to nod.

‘I . . . I’m caught in a vicious cycle.’ At last Judith was opening up and being honest. She looked into a far corner and said, ‘It’s like I’m lost in the wilderness without a map to guide me out.’

‘We are here to help you,’ Margarete said. Her jacket was making sweat stream down her back, so she took it off and let it slide behind her. ‘Have you thought about—’

‘I don’t believe it,’ Judith hissed. ‘How dare she? That woman has some audacity.’

Margarete looked to where Judith was staring and there, at the door, stood Elsie holding a large bouquet of yellow roses.

‘Did you tell her where we were meeting?’ Judith hissed at Margarete. ‘Or even worse, ask her to join us?’

‘I might have mentioned the place,’ Margarete said. ‘I cannot remember, but I would not have invited her.’ She hauled herself up from the table and rushed to Elsie. Her tights were sticking to her legs and her feet were swollen in the silly lilac pumps. ‘Elsie,’ she said. ‘I cannot believe you are here. I was getting somewhere with Judith at last, now she is agitated and anxious again.’

Elsie looked cool and calm in a light grey silk dress with matching scarf. Her hair was twisted in a French pleat and her lips were painted a pale pink. ‘I have tried,’ she said. ‘But I can’t give up on Judith.’ And with that she strode towards the table purposefully, with Margarete hot on her heels.

Judith's eyes were wide with shock and her hands trembled when she took the glass of vodka from the waitress. 'I don't know how you could,' she spat out.

Elsie laid the roses in front of her sister. 'I won't stay if I'm not welcome,' she said in a measured voice. 'But I wanted to give you these and tell you that I love you, not only as a friend, but as a sister.' Then she turned and glided through the restaurant and out of the door.

'Are you going to let her leave like this?' Margarete asked. 'Please do not. Judith, you know in your heart you have punished her more than enough. If she and Charles are to blame for making you drink again, then so are all of us.' She lowered her voice to a whisper. 'Including you.'

Judith turned to her with swollen, rheumy eyes. Margarete didn't know it was possible for someone who insisted she was happy to cry so much.

Then Judith put down her glass and silently walked out after Elsie.

'Are you ready to order now?' the waitress asked again.

'Not yet,' Margarete answered. She checked the door and looked through the window for sight of her sisters. 'I am sorry. And there might be three of us eventually.'

Margarete tried to wrap a strand of hair around her finger like she used to in times to stress, but her style was too short now and, even if she'd been able to, she knew it wouldn't have helped. A group of people around a large table in the centre of the room started to sing a terrible, off-key version of 'Happy Birthday' and Margarete had to look away from them. She couldn't imagine her family gathering together in such a jolly manner ever again.

At last, Judith and Elsie approached the table — together. It raced through Margarete's mind that they might have come up with a reason to blame and gang up on her. But they sat down side by side, Judith handing Elsie a tissue from her bag.

'I've behaved frightfully,' Judith said.

Despite the seriousness behind that statement, Margarete laughed out loud. 'You sound exactly as you did when we first came to this country,' she said. 'We so much wanted to talk like you, do you remember, Elsie?'

Elsie wiped her nose. 'You were — and are — the epitome of Britishness.'

That brought a small smile to Judith's face. She took a deep breath and said, 'I'm going to order a chicken sandwich and salad and another one of

these.’ She pointed to the dregs of her vodka.

‘How would it be,’ Elsie said, ‘if we all stick to coffee this round?’

Judith’s face dropped with disappointment, but she reluctantly agreed.

‘Now,’ Margarete enthused. ‘Elsie knows all about this, so she will have to bear with me. Let me tell you about the counselling sessions I have been having. They are very helpful and I can book you for a few, if you agree. One of us will come with you, but we will stay in the waiting room, of course.’

For the first time since Judith’s drinking had escalated, she looked interested in something other than finding ways to blame others for her misery. ‘What are you going for?’ she asked.

‘I am not sure if there is a name for it,’ Margarete said. ‘But it is to help me deal with flashbacks to Kristallnacht and the terror on the Kindertransport. Some of them would leave me almost frozen in place with terrible dizziness and a racing heartbeat. It has been very debilitating.’

‘Margarete thinks I could be suffering from the same,’ Elsie said. ‘But I’m not convinced.’

Judith looked as if a bullet had hit her. She put her hand on her chest and shook her head. ‘I’ve let both of you down so badly.’

‘No.’ Elsie was quick to placate Judith. ‘No more or less than any of us. We’ve all been guilty of the same thing at one time or another.’

Margarete agreed and Judith nodded her head uncertainly. ‘Tell me all about the counselling,’ she said. ‘I think I might be ready to dig myself out of my dark hole, with your help.’

At last it seemed as though Judith might be turning a corner. Margarete took a deep breath and allowed herself to enjoy the first meal she’d shared with both of her sisters in months.

Chapter 44

Monday 26 July 1987

Judith

Elsie has come home from Lyon buzzing. Her cheeks are pink and she spoke animatedly about what she'd observed at the trial when I had coffee with her and Charles on their terrace. I'd wanted to check in with them straight away to get an update about how Henry had been while with them, as I might not get the whole story from him.

'As you know,' Elsie said, taking a biscuit from the plate. 'I was delighted to be asked as an observer. It was such an honour.'

'We're all so proud of you. This really is proof that you have a fantastic reputation among your peers. You've worked incredibly hard.'

Elsie thought about that for a moment. She tends to wear lenses most of the time now, so the tiny lines around her eyes are more prominent. Regardless of that, she remains as lovely as she's always been, with her slim figure and the grey in her hair blending into the blonde. Not like my white roots, which form a wide halo if I don't keep up with hairdresser appointments, or Margarete, who has given up and let hers turn a uniform white. 'But I have had the opportunities,' she said. 'I always come back to that.'

'Agreed,' Charles said. 'Although you must give yourself credit for using them well.'

'Putting the recognition aside,' Elsie carried on, her lip curling in revulsion. 'The trial, although fascinating to watch, was gruelling. The Butcher of Lyon is an apt name for that monster and I can think of a good few more.'

I'd been following the trial in the news and found it very disturbing. I didn't like to read about it last thing at night for fear of nightmares. But Elsie ploughed on and I didn't have the heart to stop her, because I'd learned in counselling that it's best to talk about things rather than bottle them up. So I nodded in encouragement for her to continue.

'We were faced with so many dreadful details, weren't we, Charles?'

'And each of them was deeply upsetting.' He shook his head. 'What some people went through is unimaginable.'

‘Of course, we’d read about many of the war crimes, but when I was in that courtroom, face to face with Barbie, who could have been anyone’s elderly grandfather, the reality hit me that human beings, not faceless ogres, had carried out those heinous acts against other human beings.’

‘It’s unfathomable,’ I said, my mind refusing to fill in the graphic details.

Charles stood and began to pick off dying leaves from the potted plants surrounding us. ‘He was directly responsible for the deportation of fourteen thousand Jews from France. And he knew exactly where they were being sent to.’ He sounded more angry than I’d ever heard him and when he turned around his face was puce.

‘Of course he did, the bastard,’ Elsie spat out. ‘We all know that, no matter how hard he tried to defend himself. One victim testified that he’d had his head immersed in buckets of cold water and ammonia. Another said he’d trained dogs and used them to rape women. And he tortured so many people — children, too. I’ll never forget the testimony we heard.’

I felt as though I might be sick and excused myself to use the lavatory. In the cool, quiet bathroom, I laid my head against the tiled wall and closed my eyes. Those images that Elsie had described so vividly raced through my mind as if they were newly developed photos of a terrible catastrophe — which is exactly what they were. I washed my hands with Elsie’s lovely lavender soap and dried them on a fluffy towel.

‘More coffee, Judith?’ Charles asked. ‘I’m about to put on the kettle.’

‘Yes, please. Can I help you?’

‘Not at all. Sit and talk to Elsie, she’s really missed you and Margarete.’

Elsie gazed out at the wisteria trailing along the wall in her small garden and watched a couple of birds pecking at cracks in the path. ‘Shall I tell you the worst thing — or things — for me,’ she said.

‘Yes, share them with me.’

‘I couldn’t get the thought out of my mind that Barbie might have been one of the Wehrmacht officers who checked our identity tags on the Kindertransport. One of them caressed my cheek and I could see that Margarete was terrified for my safety.’

‘She’s always taken care of you,’ I said.

‘But she needn’t have.’ Elsie turned to look at me and I could see she’d been crying. ‘She didn’t have to take the tag from my neck before it was

torn off or insist that she was my sister and fiercely protect me, or make sure I was fed and watered before her, or pull me back into her arms when that excuse for a man touched me. She could have looked after herself first and let the Nazis do whatever they might have done to me — and who could have blamed her?’

‘No one,’ I said, ‘could ever accuse Margarete of being selfish.’ Then I could have bitten off my tongue because I’d done exactly that many times. Sorry,’ I said, hoping to redeem myself. ‘I have done so in the past, but not for many years now.’

‘I did, too,’ Elsie admitted. ‘When she left us and we’d go over and over that whole episode, trying to get to the bottom of her decision.’

‘I don’t believe it was a rational decision,’ Judith said. ‘I’ve come to the conclusion that she was backed into a corner and did what all trapped animals do — she fled.’

‘Yes, I agree with that.’ Elsie worked her fingers into the shape of a tent, like she probably does in court. ‘Then she met Kurt and liked the taste of freedom. It must have seemed like a heaven-sent escape from the humdrum routine of her life.’

‘It was such a long time ago now, but somehow strangely clear in my mind. I can remember thinking it was so out of character,’ I said.

Elsie laughed. ‘And at the same time so in keeping with her stubbornness, resilience and determination.’

‘Here we are, ladies.’ Charles set a tray down on the table. ‘Have you remembered,’ he said gently, ‘that we have a luncheon date with my girls, Elsie?’

Elsie looked at her watch and jumped. ‘Just let me finish this cup,’ she said.

‘In case she hasn’t told you,’ Charles said, ‘Elsie was extremely upset when she heard at the trial that Barbie had been responsible for ordering forty-four orphaned Jewish children to be sent to Auschwitz. If I’d had a gun I would have shot him myself and no jury would have found me guilty.’

I could tell that he was deeply moved by what he’d seen and heard — and Charles was a man who rarely let his emotions run away with him. ‘I suppose,’ I ventured, ‘that really hit home.’

‘It could have been us,’ Elsie said in a hoarse voice. ‘Me or Margarete, instead . . .’

I put my hand on her arm and left it there for a moment. ‘Try not to dwell on all of it,’ I said. ‘It’s over and done with now. Perhaps the time has come to look forward instead of back. Remember how excited we were when Reagan challenged Gorbachev to pull down that hideous Berlin Wall?’

‘But is it over?’ Elsie said. ‘And should it ever be? I have many more questions than answers now and they’re whirling round and round in my brain.’

‘Oh my goodness, I know how that can be. There’s a name for what Margarete had counselling for. I believe it’s post-traumatic stress disorder. If you didn’t have it from childhood events, I wouldn’t mind betting you do now, after the trial.’

Elsie stood, stretched and said she must do her hair and put on her make-up to meet Charles’s family.

‘One more thing.’ I grabbed her wrist to hold her back. ‘Henry?’ I steeled myself to hear he’d been no help at all and had spent the entire time away drinking French wine and flirting with girls.

‘Oh,’ Elsie said, ‘he was a wonder. I can’t work out why you moan about him so much. He took notes, carried my papers, understood exactly how the processes in court worked and has made up his mind to follow in his Auntie Elsie’s footsteps and pursue human rights, instead of corporate law. He will be a natural.’

I threw my arms around both Elsie and Charles and thanked them from the bottom of my heart for their generosity in letting Henry attend the trial with them. Then we said our goodbyes and Elsie rushed off to get ready.

* * *

On the train journey home, I went over the things we’d talked about. Elsie was a Kindertransport child but she’d never seemed to be as affected as Margarete had been — until now. She’d been so tiny and, if she’d come to us without her sister, she wouldn’t have learned anything about her background and eventually would have forgotten all about her journey across the Channel. Mum had tried to erase that from Elsie’s consciousness. She didn’t look Jewish and Mum played on that by dressing her like me and — almost as soon as Margarete had run away — taking out the plaits the older girl had so lovingly insisted Elsie maintain. She even had her

christened and kept her away from the synagogue. The only exposure she had to Jewish culture was what Margarete had whispered into her ear late at night.

Now I wondered if that was the right thing for Mum to have done. It hurts me to think her motives were anything other than thinking it was for the best. She would have no doubt dragged Margarete down the same path if Margarete's age and stubbornness — which Elsie and I had spoken about earlier — hadn't made her a lost cause. But does anyone have a right to do that to another? Change their identity and mould it into something they think more fitting or worthy? I don't think so, and the least Mum — or we as a family — should have done was ensure that Elsie was familiar with her roots. There should have been some sort of agreement that needed to be signed along those lines by foster families. But the whole thing was arranged so quickly. It was crisis management at its finest. No one had time to stop and think about the far-reaching consequences of being a Kindertransport child. That was of no importance then. It was all they could do to get those children on a train and save them. If they hadn't, there wouldn't be the fallout to worry about now.

* * *

When Henry arrived home from his Bar exam studies, I pinned him down for his version of the trial. He helped himself to a bag of crisps and a couple of custard creams, sat at the kitchen table and said it was the most fascinating time he'd experienced in court to date. 'It wasn't easy though, Mum.' He looked at the door, then into a corner of the room. 'And to think that Elsie and Margarete were a part of all that cruelty and hate.'

I leaned across and snaffled one of his crisps.

'Hands off,' he growled. 'You know I don't share food. Anyway, I'd heard some of the stories, but there were many more to take in while I was away. And to think, it could have been my aunts, who would not have been my aunts except they were the lucky ones, as Elsie kept repeating.'

'Well, that is true. They didn't get murdered like six million others.' I shook my head. 'It's incomprehensible.'

'And you did your bit,' Henry said.

'Me? I did nothing.'

‘Elsie told me how you helped her and Margarete to learn English, how you shared your toys, clothes, room, Daisy, your parents. She said you saw off the evacuated bullies and taught her how to . . . eavesdrop?’

I couldn’t help but giggle when I heard that.

‘Mum, how could you?’

I shrugged. ‘It was a great lark at the time. So, you behaved yourself in Lyon. What about now? Elsie told me you’re going to continue with the law. Is that instead of travelling around the world on a shoestring?’

His face became serious. ‘I might travel, but first I’m going to sit the Bar exam and undertake the required year in chambers.’

‘And I understand it’s going to be human rights.’

‘I think so. I’d like to concentrate on justice for people who have suffered, not companies and finance.’

‘Well done,’ I said and he smiled at me fondly.

Then, because he can’t help himself, he said, ‘You should have been a barrister yourself, Mum. You have admirable questioning skills.’

He can still be cheeky, but that’s one of the things I love so much about him. I’d never have made a barrister, but I’m in a much better frame of mind now and I still have a few good years left in me. With time on my hands, I have been thinking a lot lately about trying to do something else, but I have no idea what that something might be.

Chapter 45

Wednesday 9 September 1987

Margarete

At last Margarete had given in to pressure and signed up for an evening class.

‘Anything at all would be good,’ Kurt had said. ‘Keep the wheels in your brain oiled. There’s German at the college. And although I know you don’t need to learn it from the beginner’s stage, you might want to work towards one of the new GCSEs or an A-level? Or study some of the literature?’

‘Oh, my goodness,’ Margarete said. ‘You have looked into it.’

‘On your behalf.’ Kurt scratched through the coarse beard he’d grown recently. ‘You’d keep coming up with one excuse after another if I hadn’t.’

Margarete put aside the ballet cardigan she was knitting for Esther’s ten-year-old daughter. ‘I have never stated more than one excuse — I would not be accepted as I do not have the—’

‘Qualifications,’ Kurt finished for her. ‘Things have changed, Margarete, since you’ve been making clothes for the children. You don’t need anything other than an interest to take a language course.’

Margarete had to admit that got her thinking. During the following week, the idea grew on her and the kitchen, garden, and visiting her children and her sisters began to lose its appeal. Then Kurt told her that Dieter had agreed to run a refresher course in Hebrew at their school, and a dim lightbulb in Margarete’s head increased its wattage. That sounded an ideal way to start, as with a tutor she knew and trusted she’d be less likely to feel clumsy and embarrassed. ‘Put my name on the list, please,’ she said to Kurt.

The toast Kurt had been eating stopped halfway to his mouth. ‘Did I hear correctly?’ he teased.

‘Do not make a drama out of it. Anyway, I suppose I can change my mind closer to the time if I want to.’

‘No.’ Kurt shook his head. ‘That’s not allowed. Headmaster’s edict.’

Margarete laughed. ‘Well please book me a place today, before I decide to take up advanced knitting instead.’

But now, with the first lesson looming, Margarete wished she hadn't been so hasty. Kurt had insisted on dropping her off, probably to make sure she walked into the building, if nothing else. And despite having been to the school for many occasions and celebrations, the vast hallways and certificates on the walls and even the clock ticking loudly were daunting. She felt overwhelmed. It reminded her of starting school in England all those years ago — when her shortcomings were on display for everyone to see. She had no idea what was happening then or what anyone was saying to her or what was expected. Thank goodness she'd had Elsie to concentrate on, so she hadn't had to examine her own feelings of inadequacy, abject fear and impending doom. And dear Judith had been there, too, with her translating book, her skill at mime and her endless offers of care and support.

When she'd told both of her sisters about the course she had signed up for, they'd cheered and said they were so glad she was doing something meaningful with her intelligence. Now she wanted to bolt back home but joined the line at the registration desk because she couldn't — and wouldn't — let them down.

Then she saw Dieter, obviously looking for her. He raised his hand and beckoned her out of the queue.

'Did Kurt tell you to meet me here?' she asked.

'Of course,' Dieter said. 'He told me to drag you to the classroom kicking and screaming if need be. But there you were, chomping at the bit.'

'I would not say that,' she snorted. She could feel her legs trembling as they walked down a few corridors and eventually turned into a classroom.

'After you.' Dieter held the door open. 'And smile,' he whispered. 'We don't use the cane anymore.'

There were only half a dozen other adults sitting at desks, which helped to calm the pulse ticking in her neck. All the seats in the front row were empty, but Margarete couldn't bear the thought of sitting with her back to the others where she would imagine them sniggering behind her. So she opted for a seat right at the back, which she thought would be a vantage point from which to view the entire classroom. It helped to be sitting where her height and large feet couldn't dominate the space. From her bag she took a pen, pencil, notebook and dictionary. When they were arranged neatly, she looked up and, much to her relief, no one was watching her. That

gave her time to let her gaze wander around the room. Pinned to corkboards were biblical drawings with quotes underneath written in laboured, childish Hebrew. She smiled to herself as she pictured her grandchildren copying the words with as much precision as they could muster. Books and stacks of paper lined the shelves, highlighter pens, rulers, erasers and other teaching paraphernalia lay in piles on Dieter's desk and on the blackboard was a timetable for dinner breaks. The windows that backed onto the playing fields were open, and the heady scents of early autumn drifted in to mix with the smells of crayons, pencil shavings and children's damp clothing. Margarete thought those odours must be ingrained in every classroom in the country.

'I think that's it,' Dieter said, standing up. 'This is our class for the term. Welcome, everyone.' Then, much to Margarete's astonishment, he started to speak in Hebrew; she hadn't been expecting that. But she understood almost every word and that, to her, was even more amazing.

They went around the room and introduced themselves; that was easy. Then they were asked to learn a little bit about one of the other students and stand at the front and report their findings to the class. That was nerve-racking, but Margarete reminded herself that she was a Kindertransport child and, after that experience, she could get through anything.

The two hours flew by and culminated in Dieter announcing, 'I've been assessing your levels while we've been going along and, despite what some of you might think, you're all quite advanced.'

That made everyone laugh and a man wearing a kippah called out, 'Does that mean we get a sticker?'

'As a matter of fact . . .' Dieter reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a reel of sticky, brightly coloured badges with words of encouragement written on them. He passed them around the room and Margarete took one that read: *You're a star* in Hebrew. The grandchildren would be impressed.

'What it actually means,' Dieter said, 'is that I'm going to give you a piece of homework.'

The same man groaned and flopped back in his seat as if he were a nine-year-old.

'I'd like each of you to write a short piece about your childhood.'

A feeling of apprehension came over Margarete and she fidgeted with her pen. This might be too difficult both emotionally and academically.

‘It doesn’t have to be a dissertation,’ Dieter carried on. ‘I don’t want to read your entire life stories. It can be a snapshot of one day or a general overview. You know, where you were born, how many siblings you have, a pet or favourite meal. Keep it simple.’

Nothing about anyone’s childhood who’s the age of those present here will be simple, Margarete thought. Dieter knew that. They were all Jewish — including him — and had survived the war through one means or another, so why would he put them through such a difficult exercise, one that was certain to bring old traumas back to life?

As she filed out the door with the others, Dieter said, ‘Can I give you a lift, Margarete? I’d like to see Kurt about a few issues, if possible.’

‘Of course,’ Margarete said, although she felt her warmth for him had diminished.

Dieter’s Ford Fiesta was cold, and the heating made a terrible racket. Condensation clouded the windscreen and they sat in the car park for a few minutes waiting for it to clear. ‘You’re very quiet, Margarete,’ he said. ‘Did you enjoy the class? Please don’t tell me you’re thinking of giving up already.’

‘Do you want me to reply in Hebrew?’ she quipped, hoping to soften what she was about to say.

‘If you can, I will have done a good job tonight.’

They turned into the traffic and when they stopped at a set of lights, Dieter looked at her. ‘Stick to English for now,’ he said.

‘I did enjoy it, Dieter. Much more than I anticipated. It was an excellent class. I think you are a wonderful teacher. But . . . the homework. That task is downright cruel.’

‘Cruel?’ Dieter echoed. ‘That’s a harsh word.’

‘What do you think those memories will consist of? Daisy chains and ice creams and trips to the seaside?’ She could hear her voice rising in anger. ‘You know everyone is Jewish and that their stories will be of heartbreak, fear and deep unhappiness.’

‘Yes, of course they will. Mine included, as I’m going to undertake the exercise, too. But that won’t be the extent of the content. Not exclusively.’ He shook his head and when he turned to look at her his eyes flashed with a spark of hopefulness. ‘It can’t be, and we shouldn’t allow it to be. Oh sure, I’m all for never letting the heinous things that happened be forgotten, but

let's look for the good among the bad. There was also love and hope, faith and support, laughter, dancing, singing, sharing food — there always is. You know that from experience.'

Margarete sat in silence, looking out at the headlights coming towards them from the opposite direction.

'Besides, I have a plan,' Dieter said in a calmer tone of voice.

She raised her eyebrows although Dieter wouldn't see in the dark. 'And what is that?' she asked.

'The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust is asking for stories from survivors. So are a lot of other agencies. They think that if we don't write them all down, or record them, they will be lost for ever.' In Margarete and Kurt's driveway, Dieter turned off the engine but made no attempt to get out of the car. 'We can't let that happen.'

'I do like the way you say "we",' Margarete said. 'It reminds me of our synagogue in California, where we tried so hard to be inclusive.'

'Listen.' Dieter's face was earnest in the light from a lamppost. 'Give it a go and if it's too painful, think of a different scenario or chapter to start with. It would be a wonderful legacy for your children and grandchildren, too.'

'I have told them all the stories,' Margarete said stubbornly.

'All of them? I'll bet you haven't.'

That was true. She'd recounted a bit here and another snippet there. Never the entire story from start to finish. Didn't they deserve to know everything in detail so they could understand what she and Elsie had gone through, and why certain experiences had led her to making the decisions she had? She'd often said that on that train the stench of fear was palpable, so perhaps now was the time for her whole family to smell it, too.

'I am sure I can come up with something,' she said as she opened the car door and fumbled for her key in her bag.

Once inside, Margarete left Dieter and Kurt to their discussions about school and put up her feet on the sofa. Out of habit, she picked up her knitting project and consulted the pattern. Then she let it fall to her lap and told herself that if she didn't do it now, she never would. Retrieving the notebook and pen she'd used in class, she started on the first sentence.

Chapter 46

Saturday 14 November 1987

Elsie

Elsie handed back the manuscript Margarete had given her a couple of weeks previously and Margarete put it in her bag. They could hear Charles and Kurt whooping from the sitting room where they were watching rugby on the television and, from the kitchen, the wonderful aroma of beef Wellington wafted towards them. 'Thank you, meine Schwester,' Elsie said. 'For letting me read that. It was deeply moving.'

'Had I told you all of it before?' Margarete asked. 'I cannot remember exactly.'

'Most of it, I think,' Elsie replied. 'But not in chronological order and not all at the same time. You write beautifully. With such clarity. I felt as though I'd been there.'

Margarete threw back her head and laughed. 'You were, for most of it.'

'But I don't remember.' Elsie's voice was high-pitched with frustration.

'Not even how you screamed and wailed?'

'Oh my goodness.' Elsie covered her face with her hands. 'That is so very embarrassing. I was such a little brat. You must never allow anyone in chambers to read that.'

'You were not a brat at all.' Margarete was adamant. 'You were a tiny, frightened child.'

'And that abject terror comes over so well in your retelling.' She shuddered. 'I cannot believe that it actually happened. Imagine sending one of your grandchildren into the unknown now? Parents simply would not allow it to happen.'

'They might if the circumstances were the same,' Margarete said. 'But thank goodness for people like you who have dedicated their lives to making sure it never happens again.'

Elsie looked at the framed photos of all the little ones in the family that were dotted around the room, as if she were trying to picture them being rounded up, labelled and put on a rickety train for . . . who knew where. 'Did you say the project is for the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust, or was it some other organisation?'

‘No, that is the one, but other associations are doing the same, including the Association of Jewish Refugees. There is a huge push to put our stories in writing so the terrible atrocities are never forgotten.’

Elsie looked into the distance. She felt her brow furrow and the jowls around her neck wobble slightly. ‘That rings a bell,’ she said. ‘I was talking to someone quite recently along the same lines. Now, who was it? Oh, yes, I was with Judith and Paul and I was telling them about the Butcher of Lyon’s trial.’

‘That horrendous man,’ Margarete said. She looked as if she were tasting a lemon. ‘Why is he not dead yet?’

‘It’s so unjust, but no, he’s still alive and the French people have to pay for his imprisonment. What a waste of money. But Paul thought he was appeasing me by remarking that the war was behind us now and we should try to forget it. I said it wasn’t, nor should it ever be.’

‘Exactly,’ Margarete said, sitting forward in her seat and grabbing a cushion to hold close. For a strange, split second the gesture reminded Elsie of how she used to hold on to Kathe.

‘That is the point of collecting the memoirs. Elsie, you should write your own account.’

Elsie felt like a fraud. ‘I keep telling you, I don’t remember anything.’

‘You remember some things and it does not matter if it is second-hand from what I have told you. It would still be your story. Besides, more might flood back when you start.’

That might be true, Elsie thought. She’d just had a vivid memory of Kathe, after all, and she hadn’t thought about that poor little sock doll for years. There was more at the back of her mind, too, waiting for encouragement to come to the forefront where she could explore it. There had been a young Fraulein and a workbench in a dilapidated room. A candle had been on the table and a group of children had been sitting and listening to instructions. ‘Put one stitch that way,’ the woman had said. ‘And another crossing it. Do that twice so the crosses are in line with each other. Next, sew a cross in between for a nose, then a big, curved smile underneath. Now turn your socks and look at them.’ Her lovely voice had cracked and hesitated — and that had puzzled Elsie. She had no idea why. ‘There,’ the Fraulein continued. ‘You each have a doll to take with you on your journey.’

The children laughed and cuddled their socks close.

‘Why don’t you name them?’ their teacher said.

The other boys and girls murmured a variety of names and tried out how they sounded on each other, but Elsie couldn’t decide until a door opened and an older woman beckoned to the Fraulein. ‘A minute, please, Kathe,’ she said and the name made Elsie feel so warm and safe that she whispered it softly into where her sock doll’s ear should have been.

‘I’m going to go and get us another glass of wine, and by the time I come back I’ll have an answer for you.’

‘Is that how you make all your decisions in court?’

‘No, don’t be silly,’ Elsie said. ‘I wouldn’t do that. When it comes to something important, I rely on heads or tails with a coin.’

Margarete threw the cushion she’d been holding across the room and hit her sister on the side of the head. ‘You had better come back with the right decision,’ she said.

‘Oh, right according to whom?’ Elsie shot back.

‘Me,’ Margarete said. ‘Your big sister.’

On her own, Elsie weighed up the pros and cons. The thought of writing about her childhood, and the memories that might come to the surface as a consequence, left her feeling small and frightened — as if she were once again that tiny girl clinging to Kathe in a locked cupboard. She had no doubt that what she uncovered would be raw and uncomfortable, but there had been good things, too. Margarete and Judith and the bond they’d maintained. Daisy; the generosity, although sometimes misguided, shown by Mum and Dad; Mrs Frost and the swing in the garden. And had she forgotten her life’s work? She’d dedicated herself to ensuring that no one would have to go through another horror similar to the Holocaust. This project was following just that ethos, so she took a deep breath and steeled herself; there could be no more excuses, of course she would participate.

When Margarete’s memoir was printed by the Trust, she was approached to gather similar stories from other survivors. ‘At the age of sixty-one, I think I have found my calling at long last,’ she said to Elsie.

‘I’m so pleased for you, but isn’t it harrowing?’

‘As is your career,’ Margarete answered. ‘And I can manage to get through it because I hope it will help in the future. Besides, apart from the obvious, I enjoy travelling around, sitting down with people, recording their

stories and then putting them onto paper. It makes me feel as if I am doing something worthwhile.'

She certainly was, Elsie agreed.

Charles had started nagging her to give up a day or two from chambers. 'It's time to give yourself a well-earned break,' he said.

'But what would I do with myself?'

Charles looked around the house. 'Nothing here,' said. 'You're not exactly domesticated.'

'No, I'm not. And you cook so beautifully that there's no need for me to spend time in the kitchen.' She kissed him on the cheek and he wrapped his arms around her.

'Paint? Become governor of a school? Run for county councillor?'

Elsie shook her head at each suggestion, but she decided that she would use the excuse of writing her memoir to give herself one day off a week.

* * *

She found the process of writing immensely satisfying, but seethed with frustration at how such a genocide could have gathered momentum and been allowed to flourish. She knew the history almost minute by minute. She knew exactly how one step had led to another, but that didn't put an end to her feelings of helplessness.

She'd had a few articles published in journals but had never tackled a book. Now she decided to write one based on worldwide genocides — and related crimes — and offer what she'd learned through experience as the foundation for seeking solutions. She knew researching such unspeakable tragedies would be excruciatingly painful, but she could hear Margarete egging her on by reminding her she was a Kindertransport child and therefore she could do anything.

When she told Charles about her plans, he said, 'That's not really giving up a day or two of work, is it Elsie? It's just exchanging one type of work for another. We both know that.'

Elsie agreed with him, a smile on her face. But it was good to think that she had made something of the life that so many had risked their own to save.

Chapter 47

Sunday 5 March 1995

Elsie

The way Margarete held the top of the walking-stick made Elsie think her sister might use it as a cudgel.

‘I only asked you if you wanted to come with me.’ Margarete shifted on the park bench and looked straight ahead at the blossoming trees and the ducks, serenely swimming on the pond in front of them.

‘But I don’t understand you,’ Elsie said, following her sister’s line of sight. ‘You’ve always said you’d never go back to Berlin.’

‘Well, I have changed my mind.’ Margarete dragged the stick towards her and placed it across her lap.

But Elsie wasn’t finished with the conversation just yet. ‘And as for me going as well, there are too many memories that might surface.’

Margarete turned and looked at Elsie at last. ‘I thought you said you had expunged all of those when you wrote your memoir. Besides, it will probably be me who suffers most in that respect.’

‘I thought I had,’ Elsie said thoughtfully. ‘But who knows how a street sign or building or a German voice will excavate more that’s hidden. It frightens me.’

Margarete tightened the scarf around her neck. Despite the first signs of spring, it remained chilly and she hadn’t been out much since she’d broken her ankle last October. ‘There is always that possibility,’ she said. ‘But if that happens, I will be there for you, and vice versa.’

‘Shall we walk a bit more?’ Elsie stood and held out her arm. ‘Lean on me.’

‘See? It would be exactly like that.’

They strolled along admiring the nodding heads of daffodils and tufts of snowdrops with their promise of an end to a long, cold winter. ‘I remember years ago when you said Germany meant nothing to you. The country hated us and we owed it nothing.’

‘That was true then,’ Margarete said. ‘But not entirely now. I do not think we are hated there any more than some factions hate us all over the globe. The second and third generations have gone to great lengths to let the

world know that, in their case, the sins of the fathers should not be visited upon the heads of the children. And now that the Wall is down . . . do you not want to see it?’

‘I didn’t see the Wall when it was up,’ Elsie said. ‘So it won’t make a lot of difference to see it down.’

They stood for a few moments and watched young mothers pushing their tots on swings in the playground. ‘How I wish that was still me with my little ones,’ Margarete said. ‘Or even my grandchildren. Having middle-aged children is a sobering thought. Anyway, the Berlin Wall coming down is symbolic and I would like to see it, or what is left of it, and walk the streets that used to be no-go areas between the east and west. I want to see that the city is all right before I am—’

‘Oh, don’t give me any of that I’m getting too old stuff,’ Elsie cut her off. ‘And I won’t allow that fall you had to hold you back either.’ But there was no denying that misjudging the last step on the staircase had taken its toll on Margarete. She’d lost her confidence and now walked slowly and deliberately, checking every move she made as if she didn’t trust her feet to do her bidding. She’d had a lot of physiotherapy, diligently done her exercises, and her movement was fully restored, so in Elsie’s opinion her frailty was all in her mind.

And what point was she trying to prove by not going to Berlin with Margarete? Elsie asked herself. That she was as British as strawberries and cream and that was where her loyalties lay? That would be silly and churlish and Elsie liked to think she was neither. ‘Of course I’d love to go with you,’ she said. ‘But shall we wait another couple of months until you’re able to cast your walking-stick aside?’

Margarete beamed and tucked Elsie’s arm closer. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘That will give me an added incentive. Now, do you think we should ask anyone else? Judith and Paul? Kurt, Charles?’

‘I think it would be lovely if Judith came with us. Do you know, we’ve never had a holiday together, just the three of us.’

‘No, we have not, have we?’ Margarete sounded surprised when she thought about that. ‘How very remiss of us. We will ask her and keep it at that.’

‘Perhaps one other,’ Elsie said.

‘I do not think we could ask Charles without asking Kurt,’ Margarete said. ‘That would not really be fair.’

‘No, not them.’ Elsie laughed. ‘They can fend for themselves for a week or so. This little person.’ She burrowed deep in her pocket and brought out Kathe.

‘Kathe,’ Margarete squealed. ‘I thought you gave her to Henry.’

‘She’s been passed all around the family since then and — horror of horrors — was about to be thrown away when she was rescued and handed back to me.’

Margarete took the familiar doll from Elsie and studied her for a few moments. ‘Oh, Kathe,’ she said. ‘How you comforted all of us.’

‘But where is the second Kathe?’ Elsie watched Margarete from the side of her eye.

‘Nestled in a drawer among my vests,’ Margarete said.

‘You never told me that,’ Elsie wailed.

‘You never asked,’ Margarete retorted.

Margarete handed Kathe back and Elsie thought about the times, years ago, when she and her two sisters hadn’t freely said the things to each other that they should have done.

The breeze suddenly became fresher and a wad of steely clouds scudded across the sky. ‘I think we should make our way back,’ Elsie said. ‘It looks like rain and neither of us has an umbrella.’

Collars up, they hurried as quickly as Margarete’s caution would allow through the twists and turns of a shortcut and there, looming in front of them, was what used to be the Sorbo factory. Watching every step she took, Margarete didn’t take her eyes off the pavement, but Elsie felt her sister’s fingers claw into her arm.

‘My goodness,’ Elsie said. ‘I haven’t come this way for ages. I knew the old factory had been sold, but I had no idea the new owners had redesigned the entire front of the building, had you?’

Margarete came to a stop and rested both of her hands on the stick. Elsie watched her as she gazed at the place where she’d spent so much of her time as a teenager. ‘Yes,’ Margarete said, ‘I am glad the old signage and brickwork have gone. I hated that place.’

The venom in Margarete’s voice sent shivers up and down Elsie’s spine. ‘I thought you told me that you enjoyed your job — eventually.’

‘I was trying to fool everyone, including myself.’ Margarete tugged on Elsie’s arm so they could get moving again. ‘Until Mum found out the truth about the lipstick, I had to do everything I could to keep on her good side. She watched me like a hawk for the slightest thing that would displease her, as if she was waiting for an excuse to throw me out.’

Sympathy for what Margarete had gone through after they’d escaped Nazi terror flooded through Elsie. ‘Judith told me not long after you left home about the incident she overheard, when Mum made it quite clear that you were only tolerated because of . . .’

‘You.’

‘It must have been like living on a knife-edge — and you kept it from me at the time.’

‘I did not want you to be worried, Liebling.’

When they were at home and had dried themselves and made a pot of tea, Margarete said, ‘So, I will talk to Judith if you would not mind looking at the ferry and hotels?’

‘Of course, that’s no trouble for me. But speaking of Judith, how do you think she’s doing?’

Margarete made a satisfied noise as she took a sip of tea. ‘Do not tell me you think she is drinking again. That is my biggest fear. I just do not have the energy to sort out a mess like that again.’

‘Yes, both times that she’s succumbed in a big way have been horrible,’ Elsie said. ‘But no, it’s her eye.’

‘What is the matter with her eyes?’

‘Not both of them, just the left. It wanders from time to time, then she blinks like Dad used to do, and it straightens itself out. Haven’t you noticed?’

Margarete shook her head. ‘No,’ she said. ‘But I will ask Kurt. Kurt, have you got a minute?’

Elsie noticed that Kurt seemed to be limping, too, but when she questioned him about it he pointed to his back. ‘Bloody sciatica,’ he said.

‘Have you seen anything wrong with Judith’s eye?’ Margarete asked her husband.

Kurt shook his head. ‘Like what?’ he asked, and the story was told over again. ‘I’ll watch out for it when she comes here on Monday to work on the website and I’ll report back to you.’

‘Which website is that?’ Margarete asked. ‘You two have built so many together I’ve lost count.’

‘This one is for the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust,’ he said, stretching his back in all kinds of peculiar ways. ‘It’s quite large and complicated.’

‘That’s it.’ Elsie put down her cup. ‘She’s been working too long on that computer. I knew this new so-called Information Age would be bad for people’s eyes. It has them glued to a screen for hours, which can’t be good.’

Kurt pottered about getting a cup of tea for himself, then settled into the sagging chair he’d claimed as his own years ago. The upholstery was worn and the shape of his body was imprinted deep into the cushions, yet he would not give it up. ‘I suppose you could be right, Elsie,’ he said. ‘And she’s also in the middle of transferring all the survivors’ stories onto a hard drive. She’s a wonder.’

‘It keeps her busy, that’s what she says. And we all know how important that is.’

* * *

On her way home, Elsie thought — not for the first time, of course — about her and Margarete’s chance meeting and how it had developed into the relationship they had now. That their lives had then become enmeshed with Judith’s was even more implausible. If the story was presented to a film producer it might well be laughed off as pure fantasy. What did it prove, though, about human nature? That everyone longs for someone to call their own, or that it’s an instinct to care for young children, or that if given responsibility most people will rise to meet the challenge? But then compare that to what they had been fleeing from — monsters who did not have the slightest impulse to love or support or comfort anyone, especially those they deemed to be ‘other’.

Wherever possible in her book, she’d cited examples of love in the face of terrible crimes against humanity, and now, in retrospect, she wished she’d used her and her sisters’ shared, personal experience as a foreword. She must be getting old not to have thought about that before. With Margarete’s and Judith’s permission, she would call her publisher and see if that could happen if and when there was another print run. And after that she would start looking at arrangements for Berlin. She smiled and laid her head against the train window. She’d get cracking on researching hotels and

travel arrangements as soon as possible; the thought of a few days away with both her sisters was really quite exciting.

Chapter 48

Friday 12 May 1995

Margarete

The first thought that ran through Margarete's mind when she stepped onto the platform at Berlin Hauptbahnhof was how grateful she was that the train hadn't pulled into Friedrichstrasse — the station she'd departed from fifty-seven years before.

She stood stock still, her leaden legs unable to move her feet. She was back here after all these years. She never thought she would want or need to come back to Berlin until she realised that her story would be an incomplete book until she did. But it felt too much. She wondered if her heart and mind could take the smells, sounds, sights, the language. The reminders that she had lived through the terrors and trauma of Kristallnacht. A shiver went through her; she felt panic rise like bile from her stomach and thought for a moment that she might faint. But then Elsie was there with an arm through hers and Judith was right beside them.

Instinctively she looked around for Wehrmacht soldiers toting guns, SS officers arrogantly eyeing people up and down, children with tags around their necks and bereft parents — the majority of whom, she knew now, never saw their children again. Images of Elijah, Esther and Jacob crowded her mind and just thinking about them being wrenched from her arms crushed her heart with pain. When she'd reassured herself that, of course, those things no longer existed on railway platforms in Germany, she gave herself permission to properly look around at her surroundings.

Apart from the German-language signs and snippets of conversation she overheard, she thought they could be in any station in any large English city. She understood from Esther and Jacob, who both travelled around the world for work, that there were few countries where fashion was distinctive. There were plenty of jeans and oversized jumpers, women as thin as supermodels, men in grunge-style flannel shirts and goths dressed in top-to-toe black. She knew it was all supposed to make a statement, but sometimes she struggled to decipher what that statement might be. Just a handful of older people were dressed in a conventional German manner and even fewer young girls wore their hair in plaits. Judith pointed out a young man

in complete lederhosen, running across the concourse holding on to his befeathered Tyrolean hat. Tourists frantically searched for their cameras and Margarete heard one of them say, 'He's probably late for the bierkeller where's he's the main act tonight.'

They piled into a taxi and Margarete stared out of the window as it made its way to their hotel. It was a bright, warm day and the sun reflected off the windows of the buildings they passed. There was a billboard advertising a soft drink with exactly the same graphics as one they'd seen on the way to the railway station in London. *This*, Margarete thought, *is a good thing*. It meant that the world had gone some way towards forgiving Germany and treating the country as a European ally. But had she forgiven Germany? That was the question she asked herself and hoped to answer during this trip.

'Oh, what's that building?' Judith asked. 'It's very imposing.'

Margarete was about to reply when the taxi driver said, in near-perfect English, 'That is the Reichstag Building. It has had a chequered history.' He chuckled, half turning around to them. 'Like a lot of things in Germany.'

He looked no older than his mid-thirties, so Margarete knew he couldn't have personally experienced the war.

'Is this your first time in Berlin, Damen?' he asked.

Margarete and Elsie stared at each other across Judith, who bobbed backwards to stay out of the way. It hadn't crossed Margarete's mind that anyone would ask. For some inexplicable reason, she felt embarrassed. Then she realised it was not because she was self-conscious but because this young man might be made uncomfortable if they were to tell the truth.

'It is for me,' Judith said eventually.

'But my sister and I were born here,' Margarete continued.

'So, do you come back regularly?' the driver asked.

'We haven't been back since 1938,' Elsie said. 'When . . .'

There was silence after that for a few moments, during which Margarete could feel heat crawling across her scalp. She reached over and grabbed Elsie's hand, as much to steady her own trembling fingers as to comfort her sister.

'Oh,' the young man said. 'I see. You escaped the war. You were lucky to get out when you did.'

‘We were Kindertransport children,’ Margarete said, her voice now confident with pride. ‘And we were indeed the lucky ones. What happened to the others could so easily have happened to us.’

‘And this is our sister from the family who brought us up,’ Elsie concluded the potted history.

‘I am sorry,’ the driver said, while the taxi idled at a set of traffic lights. ‘On behalf of all German people.’

Margarete closed her eyes for a split second and could feel tears gathering along the lids. That was exactly what she hadn’t wanted to happen. Yes, she wanted acknowledgement and atonement, but from the right people, not from those who had nothing whatsoever to do with the atrocities. She put her hand on the young man’s shoulder and said, ‘I am not going to accept your apology as you have nothing to apologise for.’

He laid his hand on hers and turned to give her a brief, sad smile. *I like to believe*, Margarete thought, *that there are more of us united in good than there have ever been in evil*. ‘Now,’ she carried on. ‘Can you tell us a little more about the history of the Reichstag? You seem to be very well informed.’

* * *

The following day they walked around the exterior of the building and Margarete thought she could remember Nazi flags flying menacingly from the main façade. ‘But I do not know whether I actually witnessed that or imagined it or read about it somewhere.’

‘I suppose it’s very possible that you actually saw them,’ Elsie said, her hand over her eyes to shield them from the sun. ‘You would have been about seven in 1933 before the building was ravaged by arson?’

‘Yes,’ Margarete answered. ‘That is right, but given that was only four weeks after Hitler was sworn in as Chancellor, that would not have given them much time to get the flags up.’

Judith laughed rather bitterly. ‘They probably had them ready and waiting,’ she said. ‘And you did go out for walks every day.’

‘We did,’ Margarete said. ‘But they became fewer and fewer as the years went on towards our escape. In the end, we were practically hidden away.’

Elsie shivered and Margarete thought her sister must have been thinking of her claustrophobic cupboard. Everywhere they wandered prompted a long-forgotten memory to surface from deep within Margarete's mind. But so much had changed that often she ended up confused and lost and dwelling on the fact that her memory was so unreliable. But it would be, wouldn't it? Berlin had been so heavily bombed during the war and subsequently rebuilt that much of it was unrecognisable. Added to all of that were the many years that had gone by, leaving her nothing but ghostly shapes and sounds for memories.

They stopped for coffee on a regular basis every day, which gave them the chance to chat about what they'd seen and to decide where to go next. 'I do hope all of this isn't too much for you, Margarete,' Elsie said.

'Because of my ankle? Not at all, I hardly notice that now.'

'No.' Elsie shook her head slowly. 'Because of the memories and reminders that are clearly being churned up.'

Margarete sat back in her chair and watched an elegant older couple walk by arm in arm. She'd tried to keep any distress she felt from Judith and Elsie. In fact, she'd thought her running commentary — about the Wehrmacht soldiers she'd seen there, the bakery on that corner that had closed never to reopen after Kristallnacht, or the walk she'd been on with Fraulein Thiess that took them past the synagogue that had been boarded up — had been educational rather than harrowing. And the truth was, she didn't yet know what she really thought about it all. 'I am okay,' she said.

'But it must be hard,' Judith said, spooning the chocolate sprinkles from the top of her cappuccino into her mouth. 'All I see when I look around is a city that's doing a good job of emerging from the ashes. But for you . . .'

'Oh, I see that, too,' Margarete said quickly. 'And what a beautiful city it is. But I also remember a bit of its beauty beforehand. It had a certain attitude about it. Not arrogance, but swagger is how I'd describe it. I always had this vague idea that when I was older I would be a part of one of the liveliest, most cultured, heady cities in Europe. Then I was stripped of that notion, along with everyone else.'

The three of them sat wrapped in their own thoughts for a few moments until Margarete said, 'Do you feel any of those things, Elsie?'

‘I feel great sadness,’ Elsie said. ‘For everything this city has gone through and what I might have missed out on had the war never happened. But I suppose most people think that about their lives. The what-ifs can never be answered.’

‘I’ve been guilty of that, too,’ Judith said. ‘Especially as I get older. I wonder what my childhood would have been if war had never been declared. Very different, I’m sure, but I would never have had two sisters, so for me the positives outweigh the negatives. Another? I’ll go to the counter and order them.’

‘But this trip has made me feel more German than I’ve ever felt,’ Elsie said, turning her face to the sun and smiling. ‘I have to agree with Kennedy when he said, “I take pride in the words, *Ich bin ein Berliner*”.’

Margarete delved deep inside herself to see if she could discover the same sort of bond to the city of her birth. But try as she might, it wasn’t there. She felt nothing but a cold emptiness that made her lip curl in disgust. Germany hadn’t wanted them and Margarete could never forget that. ‘And I,’ she said, taking the tray from Judith, ‘feel more removed than ever. I am a Kindertransport child and there my affinity with Berlin ends.’

They visited parts of the Wall that were still standing and had tea in the Tiergarten. At the Brandenburg Gate, Judith stood tall and pretended to be Ronald Reagan goading Gorbachev to tear down the monstrosity. ‘I rather admire him for that alone,’ she said.

One by one, they ticked off all the sights on their to-do list. The Charlottenburg Palace, Checkpoint Charlie, the East Side Gallery, shopping, bratwurst, dinner in a traditional bierkeller. Margarete took them to where she thought her orphanage had stood, but in its place was a huge, lively shop crammed with trainers. When she’d lived there, the children had been lucky to have one pair of shoes, but now some of the young people were buying two pairs each while the trainers on their feet looked as good as new.

They wandered around the shop rather aimlessly and, through the loud piped-in music, Margarete could hear spectral whispers of ‘Hayom Yom Huledet’ and ‘Zemirot’ being sung by children’s high, pure voices. Then an innocent laugh followed by the sound of glass being smashed to powder. Someone in the crowd stared at her as she put her hands over her ears. ‘I must leave now,’ she mumbled to Elsie and Judith, who guided her to the

pavement and put their arms around her. 'The orphanage was there,' she said. 'I am sure of it.'

'Yes, but it's gone now,' Judith said, rubbing her sister's arm. 'And all of those terrible events have been razed with it.'

'No.' Margarete put her hand on her chest. 'I don't think that can ever happen. They are alive and haunting the city still.'

Then, all that was left were the heavy experiences they knew would be harrowing and hard to bear.

'Do any of us really want to see them?' Judith asked during breakfast towards the end of their stay. She savoured a mouthful of German cheese and cold cuts of meat on rye bread. 'We could spend the last couple of days swanning around instead.'

'I do not think it is a case of want,' Margarete said. 'But it would be disrespectful not to. Besides, I'm sure if we don't have those harrowing experiences we will deeply regret it. I for one will probably never get here again, so yes, we should steel our nerves and get on with it.'

So they booked a ticket to take them to Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. Margarete wished they'd taken another few days so they could have booked for Auschwitz or Buchenwald or Bergen-Belsen, but they hadn't been able to make up their minds beforehand and so eventually decided on the closest memorial site to Berlin.

The train journey was only a matter of forty minutes and then, after a short bus ride, they were there outside the gates. There was no need for Margarete to translate the wrought-iron sign — they whispered it at almost the same time: Work Sets You Free. They were the same words that greeted all prisoners in whichever hellish camp they had been condemned to. *The only circumstance in which that's true*, Margarete thought with a bitter taste in her mouth, *is if one has chosen to undertake the work in the first place.*

They joined a guided tour and were taken through the camp with a group of six others, who, like them, were quiet and thoughtful and behaving with due solemnity and respect. There was an exhibition in the Commandant's House that focused on the division of labour among the perpetrators. It was about the organisational structure of the camp with biographies of some of the SS officers who probably thought they would be venerated for years to come, followed by the outcomes of the court cases against some of them. Margarete had known, like everyone else did, that the

Holocaust was intentional but there it was in black and white — the purposeful setting out of objectives; the planning and the carrying out of what had been so carefully thought through. It made her stomach turn over with disgust. She decided, in answer to her earlier question, that she could never forgive those involved for that terrible, terrorising time.

All three of them stood side by side and read that two mass murders had taken place at the camp. Thirteen thousand Soviet prisoners of war had been executed in 1941 and another three thousand inmates later in the war, with a further thirteen thousand being transported to Bergen-Belsen.

From a permanent exhibition in Tower A, they learned of the many arbitrary murders carried out in the camp. The details were graphic and didn't spare anyone's sensibilities. The victims suffered unimaginable brutality and sadistic cruelty at the hands of SS officers and, when Margarete turned, tears were streaming down Judith's face. Her nostrils flared and she hugged her own arms tightly. 'How dare they,' she said. 'They can't have been human beings to do that to others. Animals don't treat their own so abominably.'

'But they were human.' Elsie put her arm around Judith's shoulder. 'And it has happened again and again, but we must work to make sure that at some point it ends and is never repeated.' Then she read about the murder of a Düsseldorf lawyer because he'd annoyed the guards, and the floodgates opened for her.

'Look at this,' Margarete said. 'While we were escaping after Kristallnacht, six thousand Jewish internees were crammed into a barracks planned for one hundred and fifty.'

'My God,' Elsie said. 'That could have been us. We came so close.' Although Margarete and Judith comforted her, she found a chair, scrunched Kathe in her hands, then put her fists over her face and wept. Judith bobbed down in front of her and held both of her hands while Margarete circled her palm on her sister's back and all three sisters cried together.

As they walked to the bus stop, Margarete felt like an emotional wreck and thought, looking at Elsie and Judith, that they were experiencing the same.

'I know it happened,' Elsie said. 'I know it was real, but it also seems as though it couldn't possibly have taken place.'

‘That is exactly the same for me,’ Margarete said. ‘It is as if our minds will not let us fully comprehend the horror. But we must ensure that it is never forgotten.’

‘We, personally, have gone some way to doing that,’ Elsie said. ‘All three of us, what with our work for the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust.’

Margarete nodded. ‘And your book. But still, I do not think it is enough.’

‘Perhaps nothing ever will, or could be, enough,’ Judith said.

During the train journey back to Berlin, Margarete and Elsie discussed the day, but Judith fell asleep with her head against the seat. When they pulled into the station, Margarete put her hand on her sister’s arm and gently nudged her. ‘Judith,’ she said. ‘We are here, my love.’

Judith sat up with a jolt, her left eye wild and confused. It strayed around strangely as if there was nothing for it to focus on.

‘Judith.’ Elsie sounded alarmed. ‘Sit still a minute until you feel better.’

‘I feel fine,’ Judith said. ‘But I can’t see very well, everything’s gone blurry.’

Margarete sat back down next to Judith and gently said, ‘I think we should take you to see a doctor.’

‘Oh, no need for that.’ Judith blinked a few times in a dramatic manner until her eye righted itself. ‘Come on, we’re the last on the train and I’m beginning to feel hungry.’

But Elsie and Margarete didn’t make a move and Margarete felt sure the worry etched on Elsie’s face was reflected on her own. She felt sick and her hands had begun to tremble. ‘Does this happen a lot?’ Elsie asked. ‘Margarete mentioned it a few months ago, but I’d never noticed it.’

‘Once in a while,’ Judith said. But Margarete did not believe a word of that. ‘Mainly just as I’m waking. Paul’s been nagging me to go to the optician, but you know how it is.’

Not really, Margarete thought. And she wondered if Judith was putting it off because she knew, deep down, that something could be seriously wrong and she didn’t want to face it. She’d been through so much over the years — baby Elsa, Hugh leaving her, her struggles with alcohol. At last she was happy and settled, so perhaps she couldn’t bear the thought that something else might shatter that happiness into shards of broken glass.

Guilt welled inside Margarete. Why hadn't she done something about this when Elsie first thought there might be a problem? She felt as though she were nothing more than another person turning a blind eye to the terrible reality going on around her. She was so glad they were at the end of their trip. If it had been at the beginning, she would have had to take Judith to hospital or try to get her home very quickly. As it was, they were leaving in the morning and, once home, she would take Judith to the optician herself, regardless of any protests. They were, after all, the closest of sisters. This trip had consolidated the deep love and respect they had for each other. That and the support they'd always given freely, despite a few blips along the way. Through the most dire and heartbreaking of circumstances they had stuck together, and Margarete was not about to let anything get in the way of that now.

Chapter 49

Tuesday 27 June 1995

Judith

I have been lucky with friends and family in my life — Daisy, Margarete, Elsie, Paul, Henry, my grandchildren. But today I must say farewell to the most faithful and understanding friend of them all — this diary. Never once has this loyal companion failed me in all the years we have known each other. She has listened without questioning or interrupting or criticising. I've bared my soul to her and she has been witness to my tears, laughter, dreams, rants and hopes. She picked me up when I was at my lowest and held me aloft when I was at my best.

But now my eyesight is failing and I've been told that in a matter of days the tumour will have made it impossible for me to see well enough to write. After that, it will be time to say goodbye to everyone else.

Chapter 50

Thursday 27 January 2005

Margarete and Elsie

Both Margarete and Elsie felt nervous as they walked up the central aisle of Westminster Hall to sit on the stage with the other presenters. They'd exchanged that snippet of information over breakfast at their hotel, but Margarete had reminded Elsie that she was in a much better position as she'd spoken in public so many times during the span of her career that today would probably come easier to her.

Elsie had looked at her over the thick spectacles she wore all the time now. 'Yes, perhaps I have some kind of an advantage, but this is going to be so much more emotional than anything I've done before.'

'Even the Butcher of Lyon's trial?'

'I didn't have to speak at that,' Elsie said. 'I doubt I would have been able to.'

Due to arthritis this time, rather than a broken ankle, Margarete leaned heavily on her stick as she clumped towards the front, aware of the echo of her large feet as they seemed to slap against the floor. Next to Elsie's delicate step, the sound was grating. But that had always been the way — Elsie had remained petite and doll-like and Margarete was — if anything — more ungainly than she'd ever been. How Margarete had ever thought she would get away with maintaining they were biological sisters was a mystery to her now.

The January light through the windows was steely grey and bleak, which mirrored the sombre occasion — sixty years since the liberation of Auschwitz. She hoped that her red lipstick and sparkling bracelet did not appear vulgar, but they were symbolic of her life and she had wanted them with her.

Both of them, and their respective families, thought it was shameful that an official Holocaust Memorial Day had not been declared until four years ago, but Margarete and Elsie didn't want to become cynical. They knew, after all these years, that nothing they said or did would change the world overnight. All they could do was what little they did with dignity and fortitude.

There were so many others who had come to Britain as Kindertransport children or immigrated here after the war had finished, that Margarete and Elsie had been amazed — and humbled — that they'd been asked to speak at the memorial. They had, after all, transcribed stories of much greater hardship than theirs for the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust. People who had suffered unimaginable physical and emotional wounds, but who had gone on to quietly work on rebuilding their lives and helping to inform the world of the vile malevolence that could so easily surface while people turned their backs or were caught off guard for what might seem to be no more than a matter of minutes.

So, with the help of Kurt and Charles — and various other family members — they'd set about writing a speech that they hoped would do justice to all who had suffered along with them and to those involved in rescuing them.

On either side of the aisle, they could see friends and extended family, nodding at them or giving them small smiles of encouragement. When they took their seats on the stage, they could pinpoint people they recognised, rows of familiar faces willing them on.

The theme was *Survivors: Liberation and Rebuilding Lives*, which was apt for Margarete and Elsie and for all the others present who had somehow managed to survive with them. The introductory speaker spoke about how the suffering and grief experienced by the survivors didn't end with the declaration of peace, but went on for the remainder of the victims' lives. He said that those survivors had always been intent on teaching others how to learn from the suffering they'd experienced. Their stories told of the best and worst of humanity, about how so many of them had to rebuild their lives in a different country with no family, culture or homeland to call their own and how they wished to spur the entire world into action against all forms of racism, intolerance and dehumanisation.

Then there was a musical interlude, followed by the presenter saying the audience would hear the personal stories of some of the survivors. A man spoke about living in, and eventually being liberated from, Bergen-Belsen. He'd been sent to that heinous place with his parents, three sisters, his grandfathers and an uncle, but had come out alone. Devoid of restraint or embarrassment, tears rolled down his face as he recounted the putrid conditions he'd lived in, yet a smile spread across his lined features when

he talked about how he had started his own business in London, married a beautiful woman and brought up three sons who now had children of their own. ‘What more can a man ask for than that?’ he said. ‘I have truly been blessed.’ Then he gestured to his family in the audience and they, along with everyone else, applauded the elderly man’s resilience and graciousness.

Elsie and Margarete had been very moved by the last speaker’s story and barely had time to wipe their eyes before they were called forward. They both took a deep, steadying breath and approached the lectern. As they’d agreed beforehand, Elsie began their presentation. From her pocket she produced Kathe, put the worn, patched, dingy sock doll over her hand and said, ‘When I came to England on the Kindertransport this was all I had with me: Kathe and the clothes I was wearing. In Berlin I had endured broken glass, furtively whispered prayers in cold orphanages, a dark, confining cupboard and hiding places under mouldy beds.’

Together, the sisters went on to describe the sinister sound of heavy boots hitting the ground, jeering faces in the crowds, and the overwhelming emotions of fear, bewilderment and confusion.

Elsie continued, ‘A burly man — I have no idea to this day who he was — picked me up and took me screaming and wailing to the Kindertransport. Why me? I’ve often asked myself. Where were the other children from my orphanage? Perhaps I had become separated from them and he’d found me, small and snotty and snivelling on the streets of Berlin. If so, he was the first in a chain of people who would carry me to safety and a better life here in Britain. This wonderful woman, Margarete Bauer — meine Schwester — was the second link in that chain and she is going to tell you what happened to us after that.’

Elsie had wondered if their talk was too long, but she saw a lot of people in the audience sit up straight, looks of concentration on their faces, and she was glad they’d filled their story with as much detail as they could in the allotted time.

Margarete talked about the journey on the Kindertransport, how she’d claimed Elsie as her own to help both of them, how she thought they had narrowly missed being separated — or worse — by SS officers. The audience laughed when she related how Elsie had opened her mouth and

screached when they were parted at Liverpool Street station and how Judith had manipulated her parents to take Margarete, too.

‘Our foster sister, Judith Kingfisher,’ Margarete said, a lump closing her throat. She had to stop for a moment and let grief wash over her. Elsie put her hand on her sister’s arm and cried with her. ‘Should have been here with us today as her part in this story is as important and worthy as ours. Our lives together were not perfect, because how could they have been? We were from opposing sides in a war, of different religions and with customs and cultures alien to each other at that time. Our foster parents, the Kingfishers, were what I suppose would now be called Righteous Gentiles. However’ — Margarete coughed behind her hand — ‘the Kindertransport children’s experiences differed greatly from foster family to foster family, and within ours the love my foster mother extended differed somewhat between me and Elsie.’ She and Elsie had discussed at length what they should say about that in their presentation and had decided they would mention the incongruity but not go into detail, as anyone could look up their memoirs if they wanted to read about that period of their lives in more depth.

‘But there were reasons for that, I am sure,’ Margarete continued. ‘Reasons I will not go into here and now. Instead, I will say that the Kingfishers did their very best to give us the shelter of their home, along with their time, care, warmth, schooling and opportunities.’

‘But Judith,’ Elsie continued, ‘was on an entirely different level. She did everything a schoolgirl could possibly do to help us. With no thought for herself she saw off bullies, helped us to learn English, called us her sisters and remained loyal to us until her dying day. In addition, she built websites for the Holocaust Memorial Trust and uploaded survivors’ memoirs onto the internet so people all over the world could be moved and spurred into action by their stories.’

‘She laughed and cried with us throughout our lives,’ Margarete continued. ‘And wept with us at Sachsenhausen. For Judith, there were no Jews or Muslims, no Catholics or Protestants. Everyone was simply a human being. And that was all she needed to know.’

Together, in the darkening hall, they took it in turns to tell the rest of their joint story. Margarete talked about living in California after the war had finished and Elsie spoke about her work and her book. Then they

looked up at the split screen behind them. On the left was a snapshot taken in the 1940s of the three girls in the garden with Daisy, and on the right a photo of them with their extended families. The audience clapped for a very long time and both women pointed to their loved ones in the audience. Margarete and Elsie held hands and looked out at each and every one of them, smiles of pride on their faces which were glistening with tears.

Suddenly Elsie held up her hand to quiet the audience and, in a move they hadn't rehearsed, she said, 'I would like to say one more thing. Margarete reminded me this morning that throughout our lives we reiterated to each other that we were the fortunate ones. And we will keep telling ourselves that until our dying day. Because the idea that by chance — which we now know was a well-thought out, planned and executed event — we were saved has motivated us to do whatever we can to ensure others are never subjected to anything like that atrocity again.'

There was another thunderous round of applause. A few other, moving speakers followed, then a haunting piece of music called 'Be a Beacon in the Darkest Night' was played beautifully by the string section of Elijah's orchestra. Tears flooded down the faces of everyone present, including Margarete's and Elsie's. To think, if it hadn't been for the Kindertransport there would be no Elijah — or Esther or Jacob — or their children's children and so on and so on. So many of the people sitting in the audience would never have been given the gift of life. The world would not have benefitted from their energy, their words, acts of kindness, ideas, humour and intelligence. Unlike the millions who had existed but whose lives had been erased as if they were no more than the numbers tattooed on their arms or written on the tags draped around their necks.

Sixty yellow Shoah candles, each commemorating the life of a person murdered by the Nazis during the war, were lit in silence. Margarete and Elsie read the cards memorialising the victims their lights represented. Elsie leaned across and whispered something into Margarete's ear. Margarete looked at her sister's dear, tear-stained face and nodded in agreement. She, too, knew she would never get over the astonishing fact that, although it could have been, should have been, might have been, and so nearly was them — they were two of the lucky ones, and for that they were both eternally grateful.

THE END

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Jan Casey is the author of several novels portraying the lives of some of the 'forgotten heroines' of World War Two, employed variously as construction workers, bomb trackers, letter censors and war artists. *They are The Women of Waterloo Bridge, Women At War, The Woman with the Map, The Letter Reader and The War Artist*, all published by Aria (Head of Zeus). She spent part of her childhood in California but later moved back to the UK. She has an MA in Creative Writing from Anglia Ruskin University and lives in Norwich.

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